

Exotic Flower

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Category: HakuÅ•ki/è-„æ;æé-½

Genre: Romance, Supernatural

Language: English

Status: Completed

Published: 2012-07-14 21:06:29

Updated: 2012-12-15 03:22:31

Packaged: 2016-04-26 17:11:37

Rating: T

Chapters: 22

Words: 62,788

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: The days of samurai and demons had long passed. The new millennium brought times of peace for humanity but demons were slowly recovering beneath the surface of the dark lake. Some were content to remain in the murky depths while others were looking for their chance to re-establish themselves. The Western and Eastern boundries were bound to be broken. Sequel to Hanashobu

## 1. What is change?

\*\*Well, I didn't think I was going to do a sequel but the wheel just kept spinning x.x I'll try and follow my weekly update schedule though I think I'll have it on Friday or Saturday this time ^^ I hope you guys enjoy it!\*\*

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><p>Exotic Flower</p>

Chapter 1: What is change?

\*\*Kazama Chikage\*\*

I thought the looming clouds might be promising. If they brought rain, I wouldn't have to water the ridiculously huge garden Ayame had insisted on some years ago. The pool had been her idea as well.

It took up some of the space that the garden had previously inhabited but brought even more work. I'd been designated the pool boy.

Tires screeched on the turn down the road and the wind stirred by the car knocked cherry blossoms off the neighbor's tree and into our yard. I felt like sighing but held it in, stretching out one leg instead. Sighing was a bad habit of mine, according to Ayame.

She was visiting Emi down the street, probably planning a flower viewing party at the nearby park. They dragged me to Gion last year.

Honestly, it wasn't how I first imagined my retirement.

Certainly, humans who looked at us still saw us as a young and childless couple. They'd never guess that we were the opposite. It was sometimes a bit troublesome to deal with curious eyes but we could always spend time in Agano where everyone was familiar with us.

I'd actually grown quite fond of Agano but I couldn't deny that it got boring after a while. The garden was even bigger too.

A half smile found its way onto my face. I still thought that it was nicer when the house was noisy.

\* \* \*

><p>The weather was warming up again. Ren's fourteenth birthday had just passed.</p>

His interest in learning kenjutsu had waned some, especially now that there was a ban on carrying swords. It didn't bother me much since most of my time was spent in Agano or back at home, where human laws didn't matter.

He still practiced most afternoons, probably from the lack of anything else to preoccupy his time. There were enough kids running around Agano now that he could easily make a bit of money but he refused to babysit anyone but his own sisters. He complained that they were enough trouble as it was.

Kaori and Nanami were nine and mostly sensible. They tried his patience sometimes but were smart enough to stay away from seriously dangerous areas.

Chouko was turning seven in a few weeks. She was hardly any worry at all. She spent all her time in the garden with her mother. She did fall into the river once but that was hardly her intention.

"Chikage? Kuri was wondering about Ren's new sword,"

I lifted my head off my arm, contentedly gazing back at her. "Come sit with me,"

She rolled her eyes but followed my instruction. She shouldn't have been on her feet constantly with another child on the way. I laid my hand against the bump, just in time to feel a slight kick.

"Tell Kuri he hasn't broken it yet. I told him that if he broke another sword in less than six months I wouldn't give him the Douji-giri,"

That drew a slight giggle from her. We'd both seen how much he ogled at the sword.

"Do you think he'll last?"

"Not a chance," I pressed a kiss behind her ear and she swatted at me. "He and Rikuto are too serious when they spar,"

Ren was too hotheaded to keep quiet and the shoji screen from the room down snapped open. "What the hell do you know, Oyaji? I can keep this sword from breaking for the next ten years!"

I snorted. "I guess you'll have to stop fighting with Rikuto for the next ten years. He's picked up some of your mother's techniques,"

Rikuto had become quite capable in the last few years. Some were wondering if he wanted to succeed Ayame. Unfortunately, he would probably be past his prime (if not dead) by the time Ayame was ready to give up her position.

"You basâ€"!"

"Ren, watch your language," Ayame chastised. She didn't really care but the twins had just arrived back from their latest adventure at the pond down the road. There were seeds and leaves stuck in their bobbed black hair.

"Watch your language, Ren-nii!" Kaori sang, tackling him. Nanami had a bundle of pond reeds and slapped him with the still wet side. Both of their dark red eyes twinkled with the same mischievous glint.

They both grabbed an arm and I swore I could see a vein popping on his forehead from where I sat. He'd taken to wearing his hair short recently, stuck up in every direction. I thought it might have been his way of rebelling against everyone's opinion. The villagers all agreed that he was the splitting image of me and maybe he thought wearing it like his uncle Chiaki made him look less like me.

He raised his arms, trying to shake them off but they both squealed in delight instead, knowing it would piss him off more.

"Mattaku!"

Chouko seemed to have heard the conflict and was drawn towards it like a moth to the flame. She wasn't interested in rough housing though so she sat next to Ayame, putting her ear to her belly.

"Ka-chan? When will the baby be born?"

Ayame smoothed down her messy golden hair and Chouko made herself comfortable by lying across her knees.

"Soon,"

"I hope it's a baby brother,"

"Un! We need another boy in this family, it's getting too crowded with cry babies," Ren agreed enthusiastically.

The twins pouted and tried to throw him off balance by swinging but he wasn't having any of it.

"We want another little sister!"

Chouko blinked her golden eyes sleepily. "A little sister would be nice too . . ."

I chuckled. Chouko just didn't want to be the friction between the bickering of her older siblings.

Ayame rubbed her stomach thoughtfully. "I think it's going to be a boy,"

The twins voiced their displeasure and but Ren's mood improved. This sort of playful bantering could have gone on forever and I wouldn't have complained.

\* \* \*

><p>"Ka-san, no, Agano Ayame."</p>

I crossed my arms and Ayame turned to face her youngest son, now a grown man. She wore a melancholic smile.

"Agano Ayame, I'm challenging you to a formal duel for the right to lead the Agano mercenaries."

Ren appeared next to me, his newly cut hair still hanging in his eyes. He'd never wanted to join the Agano mercenaries, let alone lead them. He'd cut it just to let Shou know that he supported his decision to challenge the leader, their mother.

Shou was about to untie his long hair, kept in a ponytail. His dark bangs hung in his determined golden eyes, his defined lips turned stubbornly down. The residents of Agano often called him feminine but that alone wouldn't quell his pride.

"Shou, I combed your hair this morning, I know how long it is," Ayame interrupted.

He let go, a blush creeping across the bridge of his nose.

Ayame produced the subjugating beads from her sleeve and tossed one at him. He caught it, his expression mostly unreadable. He was trying to push aside all his doubt, knowing he'd never be able to beat her if he held onto it.

Shou was a genius when it came to the sword. His experience didn't quite match up with Ren's but Ren wasn't the one he was fighting.

Ren had no intention of becoming the leader of the Agano or even the future head of the Kazama. He'd been hot tempered and ambitious as a child but that had slowly begun to fade away, leaving him aloof and unconcerned with the world around him.

I thought he might have surpassed me, even my father, though there was no way of really knowing since he hadn't drawn the Douji-giri or any other blade since he turned twenty-one. I wondered when I had stopped understanding my children. I still couldn't understand the girls, but I'd never really understood them to begin with.

I almost felt frustrated. I hadn't realized my time with them would be so short. Already they were ready to leave and do things their own way.

The smooth but grating sound of two swords being unsheathed at the same time brought me back.

Ayame waited for Shou with her Steel Petal style at the ready and I wondered how Shou's own unique style would match up against it. His was much more direct, which could mean the end for him. If he wasn't careful she'd break his sword in just three swings.

Their blades met and he passed her off, turning to catch her unprotected back. She was just as quick and their blades clashed again. He forced her back once more and stepped in with the third swipe before she could retreat any further.

I expected one of their blades to shatter, especially Shou's since it was just a regular steel blade. It didn't and I realized he was pressing Ayame more than I'd thought, either that or Ayame's heart wasn't in it. I suspected it might have been a bit of both.

Either way, Shou was pounding relentlessly on her defense. She had no time to make him submit.

Ren crossed his arms. He was wearing a plain button up shirt and black dress pants. He'd taken a liking to the Western fashion recently.

"Hahaue is going to lose," he informed.

I inclined my chin. "Your mother's ideals can no longer protect the Agano's way of life. It's only natural that someone younger and more ready to change would need to take over,"

His detached expression remained unmoved. "Do you think she's willing to retire?"

I shrugged. She had to be. She and Shou hadn't been seeing eye to eye recently. No one would be surprised that Shou had decided to take action in this way. He was very forward.

He managed to cut her arm after another lunge and both came to a sudden stop, staring the other down.

Ayame's hand clenched tighter on the hilt of her demon blade. She looked like she wanted to continue but took off the beaded necklace anyways. "I couldn't cut you even if I wanted to. Maybe I've gotten soft recently, or maybe I've always been this soft."

She sheathed her demon blade and I had a feeling it wouldn't be drawn again for a long while. The blade had been collecting dust for some years already.

"Shou, you're worthy of the Agano name," she admitted. "You can do what I couldn't do,"

Shou returned his blade to its wooden scabbard and bowed deeply.  
"Thank you, Ka-san,"

Ren turned on his heel, bored with the show. "Everything's changing; you better not get left behind, Oyaji."

I shook my head. I'd already fallen behind.

\* \* \*

><p>"Nee-san! You didn't? You tease Ren-kun too much!"<p>

There was laughter and I sat up. Emi and Ayame spent a lot of time together, being the gossiping old women that they were. They might not have looked it though.

"Chikage?" Ayame called. "Do you want some cake and tea?"

"Nii-san, come out and chat with us," Emi added.

"Have you watered the plants yet?"

I stood and shook the stiffness from my limbs. "I'll water them after supper," maybe it'd rain by then. I made my way to the remodeled kitchen, a cross between modern and traditional dÃ©cor.

Emi's brown hair was half pinned up in the back and ironed into loose ringlets. She uncovered a glass dish, revealing a plump strawberry shortcake with two extra thick layers of cream. She'd probably made herself. That seemed to be her favorite hobby now.

"Hm? Where's Ren-kun?"

"He does have his own apartment," I rebuked. She made it sound like he still lived with us, or at least spent all of his time here.

I took a seat. Ayame complained that I took up too much space when I tried to help out. It wasn't my fault that the table set she picked out made the kitchen tiny.

She hugged my shoulders and leaned heavily on the back of the chair, making it squeak. "Green tea orâ€?"?

"Green tea." She had about fifty different types of tea. I doubted she'd name them all out but I figured I'd save some time.

"Someone's grumpy," Emi commented.

Ayame retreated after ruffling my hair. "He just doesn't want to water the flowers with my pink watering can,"

Emi cut off a sudden snicker with one hand.

The kettle started to boil and Ayame returned, smoothing down the hair she had just messed up. "Has Ren been by?"

"He was here an hour ago but said something about having to model for the freshmen," he hadn't sounded very enthusiastic but when did he ever? "He also said he'd come for supper since the cooking club changed their lock,"

"That's nice,"

"Modeling! Are they drawing him nude?"

If there was ever a time for a facepalm it was now. "I didn't ask and he didn't say," I really couldn't understand what had possessed Ren

to suddenly join an art school.

Emi sat across from me, her chin in her hands. "I guess I'll save him a slice of cake,"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Kazama Ren<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I fought the urge to yawn. My arm was going dead as well and I really want to scratch the back of my neck. I ground my teeth to distract myself and blinked sleepily. I didn't want to be here but the pay would be nice.<p>

Toshio was amongst the freshmen and I had to wonder what had compelled him to join an art school. His brow was wrinkled and it wasn't hard to see that he was holding back a roar of laughter.

Those purple eyes of his were swimming with mirth and if he weren't of any relation to me I might have decided to knock him out cold after the next hour was up.

I didn't think what I was wearing was that funny. It was better than wearing nothing, at least.

"The Americans have toga parties when they go to post secondary school," one girl near the front remarked, breaking the silence. "Isn't that so embarrassing? Just walking around in nothing but a sheet?"

"No kidding," her friend replied.

I felt like clearing my throat or something. They weren't the ones sitting about in nothing but a "sheet". Thankfully the purple and gold trimmed stretch of cloth was a little more than that. The drama department at least knew how to make their costumes comfortable.

"Isn't it a total mockery of Greek culture?"

A few seats away someone dropped their pencil. Her lip was twitching as she bent to pick up her pencil. I'd thought at first that her hair was dyed blonde but there was no sign of dark roots.

"Toga's are Roman. The Greeks wore practically the same thing but I think they called it by a different name," her features were mostly Japanese but her eyes were distinctly Western in color and shape. "Toga parties aren't just American either. They happen in Europe and other parts of the world as well,"

She was ignored by the other girls and nervously picked at her full, face framing, bangs. The guys stirred, their pencils hovering over their papers.

"Hey, what part of the world are you from?"

"Yeah, I didn't even notice at first but your eyes are really

green,"

There were only a couple guys in the class and it seemed they were all eager to be the first to ask about her.

"Can I have your number? Wait, I don't even know your name yet!"

I closed my eyes, pretending to have fallen asleep. I would have rolled my eyes otherwise.

It seemed to me that she hadn't been looking for attention like the first girl. She just couldn't keep her mouth shut when she heard something that bothered her. She somewhat reluctantly picked out her next words.

"Fujiwara Maria from London. I lost my cell phone on the flight over and haven't gotten a new one yet,"

The guys seemed content enough with that but without even looking I could tell the girls were getting more and more jealous. It wasn't her fault that they were ordinary when sitting next to her.

Toshio couldn't resist joining the interrogation. "Your Japanese is really good; you must have lived here for a while,"

"Well, kind of. I lived here until I was seven but my mom wanted to go back to London. Dad wouldn't budge so they split up and I ended up with Mom. Until two years ago I spent all my school holidays that lasted longer than a week here though,"

Toshio continued to monopolize the conversation. There was a growing tension between both genders now. "Heh? That must have been tough,"

She seemed to relax a little. "I didn't understand a word at first. Mom's accent was really different,"

"Your mother wasn't from London either?"

"She's American; she just works in London,"

The professor, who'd been roaming the different rooms, rapped on the door to the studio. "Shush! Concentrate, freshmen,"

Everyone guiltily shut up and I let a small breath free.

"Aree? When did the model close his eyes?"

I hoped everyone turned to glare at whoever made the observation. He obviously hadn't been working for the last ten minutes.

"Model-san . . ." he beckoned, "are you napping?"

I felt my temple throbbing.

Toshio seemed unable to hold his amusement in and guffawed loudly, drawing everyone's attention again. He really had no shame.

I glared at him, eyes half lidded. "Toshio, shut up."

He quickly composed himself, though he still grinned. "Sorry, Kazama-san,"

That sobered up the atmosphere. They'd probably thought that nothing could involve me in their petty conversations after I'd remained quiet for so long. I was still a junior though and they decided it was best to listen to me.

Really, what was the point of me joining an art school after all these years? I'd been painting on my own for the last century without anybody else's help. Ka-san had critiqued occasionally but that was about it.

I couldn't wait for this session to conclude so I could change back into regular clothing.

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><p><strong>I started this a bit suddenly since I wanted to release it on the fourteenth of the month x.x I think it might be a bit difficult to post a chapter every week for the next two weeks but I'll try :D I want to improve since I think I didn't do my best with Hanashobu ^^<strong>

\*\*Anyways, please review :D\*\*

2. Time sweeps us off our feet

\*\*Please review, everyone!\*\*

\*\*Many thanks to Arcee-chan for being the first follower ^^~ thanks for reviewing as well! I hope that I can do an even better job on this fanfic :)\*\*

\*\*Thanks to Mochi for being the first reviewer!~ I'm glad you liked Hanashobu as well ^\*\*

\*\*Thanks to bouncymochi for becoming a follower as well! Exotic Flower is certainly getting off the ground quickly :D you added Hanashobu to your favorites and alerts way back in December Q.Q you are an amazing person.\*\*

\*\*Thanks to wenyigo for becoming a follower! I hope you like Exotic Flower just as much as you liked Hanashobu ^\*\*

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><p>Exotic Flower<p>

Chapter 2: Time sweeps us off our feet.

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><p><strong>Kazama Ren<strong>

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><p>I somehow got roped into joining a drinking party, by Toshio of course. There might have been a significant age difference between us

but it didn't stop him from sticking his nose in my business. If anything, he felt more compelled to.<p>

I grew up with Toshio's father, Hijikata Souji, so I had to cut him some slack.

Souji was about a year older than me and had stayed with our family in Agano when his father fell ill. It'd been my first time seeing 'Hakuouki', the only human man my father admitted respecting. Even in his weakened state I could see the shadow of a brilliant warrior.

I hated Souji at first though. He acted incredibly smug and dangled the small age gap over my head, refusing to answer me unless I called him Senpai. He didn't let his father's health bother him or my taunt of him being a half demon. He even beat me to a bloody pulp without dropping his infuriating smile.

It took me a while to see his kinder, softer, side. Unfortunately I didn't notice it until the day of his father's funeral.

His mother was a petit and thoughtful woman with big, understanding, eyes. Her sense of fairness was probably unsurpassed and she'd been strong for her ailing husband in his time of need. She had tried her very best to not worry him.

When he died, that strength broke apart. Souji was the one to hold her together and keep her steady for as long as he could. He let her grieve and hid his own tears.

After that Souji returned to being an ass and for years afterwards we couldn't be in the same town without trying to chop each other up. Even when my temper cooled, he became the breeze that could ignite the embers again.

Nanami encouraged me to understand him and while I pondered over that I failed to notice that she'd been hopelessly in love with him for years. That only fuelled my anger towards him as he happily skipped from courting one woman to the next.

She received many proposals but refused each one. Her twin sister Kaori and her younger sister Chouko were both married and even had children of their own by the time Souji realized that someone had been waiting for him.

Theirs had probably been the most awkward wedding I ever attended.

These days I got along with Souji fine enough, but his knucklehead son had taken over and I had to wonder if Souji wasn't giving him tips on how to piss me off.

That irritation brought me back to the present.

We were sitting at the table farthest from our group. There were a number of freshmen that were probably underage but this particular bar doubled as a restaurant. The food smelled pretty good too.

I didn't like drinking in public since it looked suspicious. I'd have a couple glasses of sake or beer but anymore and people would be waiting for me to get tipsy.

Toshio nudged into me. "Kazama-san, buy me a drink,"

I shoved his elbow away. "Buy one yourself,"

"I can't, I'm technically underage right now,"

"Then obey the law,"

He scowled at me. "No one here really cares,"

Someone must have overheard as the group of guys from the class earlier today made their way towards us.

"Senpai, you're over the legal drinking age, right?"

I fixed them with a cold glower. It looked like they had already exhausted their previous host. They were staggering.

"Buy us a round of drinks, please. We'll pay you back,"

I sipped on my own drink without sparing them another glance. "Go ask someone else,"

They bartered a little more but eventually gave up. They wandered over to Tachibana, a senior with a receding hairline that he chose to show off by spiking with gel. He was popular enough in our art school but most of the women steered clear of him now. He'd almost been charged with rape last fall.

"Look at this girl, she can certainly stow her alcohol away!"

My eyes fell on Fujiwara Maria. She was sitting at the end of the table where Tachibana had also scooted over. Summer hadn't started yet but she was wearing orange short shorts and a white and gray striped T-shirt. She was wearing over-the-knee black socks as well and I assumed it was just her particular taste in clothes. It wasn't as if every other woman here wasn't wearing a mini skirt and low cut blouse.

The guys had her drinking sake and gesturing for her to let them refill her cup almost after every sip.

She polished off the entire bottle in record time. Tachibana had excused himself for a moment while everyone else took turns filling her cup and brought her back a tall glass of chuhai.

Chuhai was mostly harmless by itself but he wasn't fooling me. I caught him swiping his hand over the rim and saw the small trail of fizz as something quickly dissolved in the drink.

"Yare-yare," I muttered to myself. This probably wasn't going to end well. Toshio followed my gaze and waggled his eyebrows at me, clearly misunderstanding. I punched him hard underneath the table and he discretely nursed his side.

Tachibana nudged the drink towards her.

"I've already drank too much," she laughed, sliding the drink back.

No one was fooled. She wasn't close to being over the top drunk.

"Last one, Miss Lightweight," Tachibana teased. "This drink isn't strong,"

She somewhat cautiously took the drink and tasted it. Finding nothing wrong with the taste she thanked him and chugged it. I was a little impressed that she'd been chugging one drink after another for a half hour without it showing.

About five minutes later, she was starting to tilt to one side while blinking her eyes slowly. No one seemed to notice anything strange and just assumed she'd hit her limit. Tachibana was making up every excuse in the world to get her away from the table.

I sighed. Human men really were the worst.

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><p><strong>Shiranui Kyou<strong>

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><p>"Shiranui-san," an annoyingly familiar voice warned.<p>

I wished I weren't as well acquainted with the owner but there was nothing I could do to make it otherwise.

"I know, I know," I growled back, sliding a new magazine into my handgun.

I hated to be pushed around by someone many times my junior but I really wasn't in any position to complain. The Agano were hard to deal with normally and it didn't help being both indebted to them and collared for breaking their code, now the universal code of all demons in Japan.

A hundred years ago demons could do whatever they liked and humans had to like it or lump it, or pretend we didn't exist. I missed those days. It'd been so easy to come and go as I pleased and anything I wanted for was mine. Mostly.

Either way, those days were gone and I had to like it or lump it. My job as one of the dogs of Agano was to shut up other noisy demons whose actions threatened to expose us. I'd been one such demon not so long ago.

I saw Amagiri and Kazama a lot more often now but that wasn't really a plus. They just said whatever they wanted and went on with their merry lives.

"Shiranui-san . . ."

Instead of being free, kicking the crap out of any stupid human or demon gang that got in my way, I was stuck following the orders of the Agano's brat.

He actually looked a lot like his grandmother, Kazama's wife. His

father, Shou, was the male version of her and the leader of the Agano for the last hundred years or so.

Kaname had his mother's tan though. I'd never actually seen her but it wasn't unusual to hear the older members of Agano reminiscing about her strength and beauty, always in that order.

"Shiranui-san . . ."

"I know, I know! I'm not ignoring my job,"

He and his father were alike in personalities. Stony.

I didn't like any of the Agano. They were just a stuck up bunch with too much hot air. They were hypocrites, trying to protect us by weakening us. Admittedly, the number of demons had risen since they'd established themselves all over Japan but it also felt like the recent generations were becoming more human.

Kazama seemed to think that ignoring one's inner nature made it dissipate. I agreed with him.

"They're finally here,"

He might have been a brat but his senses were top notch. Kazama's bloodline was probably the strongest remaining in the Oni society. Agano Kaname was no slacker.

He pissed me off in that regard. He liked to walk all over me, just like his grandfather.

I heard the footsteps echoing down the alley and hit the safety on the gun, hiding it in the baggy front pocket of my hoodie to avoid frightening our prey away. Meanwhile, I saw the hilts of daggers slide into the palms of Kaname's hands.

He had more weapons concealed than the average ninja. I'd hate to see him go through a metal detector.

I stepped into the semi light, waving to the figures immersing. "Yo, nice evening?"

They startled back and nervously assessed their surroundings. They were mostly young, or at least that's how they appeared. I had no idea if they even looked the same underneath their glamour. Damn foxes.

They bolted but were cut short by Kaname's sudden appearance behind them. His yellow eyes glowed hotly, casting light of their own. His two blades glinted as he held them aloft, ready to capture the first one to try to escape.

The Kitsune seemed to realize who they were up against and held their hands up.

"What are you two Oji-san's up too?"

I guessed he was the leader. His disguise was wearing thin and his pupils were beginning to elongate. His anxiety was transferring to his comrades. They were a pitiful bunch.

"Playing tricks on human's in this day and age is one thing, but threatening to curse them to get their money? How unoriginal is that?" I scoffed.

Kaname took a step forwards and the group flinched as one. "Come with us and be judged by the council of High Elders. If not, I can't promise that your blood won't be spilt here,"

They jumped in all directions, some climbing up the building using whatever they could to pull themselves up. I fired, aiming for their hands and less than a minute later Kaname had gathered them, arms bound with the magic he'd studied from his grandmother.

"This is so boring," I complained. "Isn't there anyone stronger?"

"If there were it wouldn't be good, Shiranui-san,"

"Yeah, yeah. Let's just get the hell out of here,"

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><p><strong>Kazama Ren<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I hadn't actually needed to rescue Fujiwara Maria.<p>

The last I'd seen of Tachibana was him nursing a swollen eye. She'd still been conscious enough to throw a punch when he'd half dragged her out for 'fresh air'.

The real problem was getting her home now. Nobody knew where she was staying and there was apparently no one for me to try to contact either. I found myself carrying her under one arm back to my car. I was glad she was both short and slim, enough for it to look natural for someone who seemed to have average strength.

She was still mumbling, though it made no sense to me. I thought she might have been speaking a combination of Japanese and English. I wondered if she was frightened and considered trying to reassure her. It was her own fault so I decided to save my breath.

I made it to my Toyota Corolla without drawing any attention and clumsily loaded her into the passenger seat, banging my head on the rim of the door once. She slumped over and struggled to open her eyes and I reclined the chair, hoping that would keep her neck from cramping.

Cigarette smoke wafted over and I peered up, spotting Toshio sitting on the hood of his piece-of-crap four door. He flicked his cigarette butt to the ground and slid off the hood, stomping it out.

"Eh, taking a girl home? You haven't dated in years though,"

I turned my nose to him, shutting the door and retrieving the keys. "Tachibana's handy work. Nobody seems to know where she lives so I'm dropping her off with Mom and Dad for the night. They always have plenty of room,"

Toshio stretched, cracking his fingers above his head. "I hear her parents are super rich. I hope they don't call the cops or anything,"

"Idiot, she's here alone," she wouldn't be here at all if her parents were going to fuss over her like that.

"Oh? I thought she was some well-bred good-to-do Oujo-sama,"

I shook my head at him. "This isn't an anime, you otaku. Her parents are divorced so she's been in shared custody all her life. Now she's just doing what she wants to do after being passed back and forth for so long,"

Toshio shrugged and stared at his cigarettes, considering having another one. "At least, that's what the other students say, right?" he shrugged. "I still think she's a bijin and an Oujo-sama type of person,"

I sat heavily in the driver's seat, gripping the steering wheel tightly. It'd be nice to put him in a headlock about now. How could someone born in the nineteen twenties become an otaku in present day?

Toshio never really had a problem adjusting to the times, I suppose. His attitude let him embrace change of any kind.

I frowned at Fujiwara Maria from the corner of my eye. She still occasionally managed to open her eyes; the pupils of her green eyes tiny, making them appear distinctly brighter.

There were goosebumps on her arms and I turned the heat up. With that, she finally succumbed to whatever Tachibana had given her. I hoped it wasn't something that could have awful side effects when taken with alcohol.

I almost decided to push her off onto someone else; loathing the questions I'd have to answer when I dropped her off for the night.

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><p><strong>I'm still trying to warm up to the characters and there are a couple things I have to work out in regards to the plot but I'm really hoping I'll be able to update weekly ^^ Here's to wishing for a steady development!<strong>

3. Feeling like you put effort into nothing

\*\*Please review, everyone! \*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower<p>

Chapter 3: Feeling like you put effort into nothing.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Kazama Ren<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I pulled into the driveway of my parents' rather traditional home. The cherry tree in their neighbor's yard was glowing with the light of the full moon shinning down on it and the petals fell in swirls every time the wind blew.<p>

I saw a light come on in the house and unwillingly unbuckled my seat belt. I did the same for Fujiwara Maria and got out, slinking over to the passenger door. I slung her over my shoulder, not caring that she hung limply, ribs digging into my shoulder blade. She really was light. I doubted she was a hundred pounds.

Whatever Tachibana had given her had take full effect. She wasn't just asleep; her breath and pulse was shallow and her legs felt cool through her socks. I'd see what Oka-san thought and hopefully she'd be able to keep an eye on her. Otherwise I'd have to bring her to hospital; another fiasco.

The door was unlocked, as it usually was (they obviously didn't have to worry about crooks), and I kicked my shoes off, pulling her ankle high boots off at the same time. The heels were wedged.

"I'm home," it wasn't really my home anymore but I'd probably say that no matter how many years passed. I might have been the oldest but I was still the closest to Mom and Dad.

Mom was the first one to greet me. "Ren? What are you doing here so late at night?" her eyes fell on the limp form I hoisted over my shoulder and her eyes grew in size. "What the hell?! That's no way to hold a lady!"

I rolled my eyes. That was just like her, ignoring the important questions that should be asked. Maybe that just proved how much she really trusted me.

Dad appeared around the corner, wearing a plain gray yukata. I doubted he would ever completely give up his traditional clothing. "Weren't you out drinking with Toshio?"

I felt a frown growing. It appeared neither one of them wanted to ask what I was doing with the human. It would be easier to explain if they did. Then I wouldn't feel like I explained it for nothing. I suppose I would just answer Dad's question since I could add onto it.

"I was, but some crazy senior thought he'd take advantage of the foreign freshman," that should have sufficed.

Oka-san flashed a small smile and gestured for me to pass her the girl. "So, what's her name?"

She was a strange little woman. I grew up in Agano listening to everyone talk about her before she had kids. The most interesting stories always came from Oyaji but everyone seemed to remember something funny or crazy she had done.

I was most accustomed to her maternal side. She had always been very

motherly, doting almost to a fault.

Still, I knew the soft golden eyes hid a side of her that she rarely showed.

"Fujiwara Maria."

"And you want to leave her here for the night?"

I sighed. "She was already too out of it by the time I stepped in. I couldn't get her address from her and no one else knew either,"

She shrugged and went about preparing a room for the girl. I was sure there'd been weirder requests from Shou in the past.

Dad scoffed. "Why not take her back to your apartment?"

"It's a dorm. One room. Not happening."

He chuckled. "What's the matter? I don't think she'd complain after you rescued her from some lewd senpai,"

I pulled my bangs back, scratching my hairline. "Let me further clarify. There are two options at my place; the futon and the floor. I'm not giving up my futon and it'd hardly be appropriate to let a girl sleep on the floor,"

"Always the gentleman," he remarked.

I rolled my eyes and stretched my shoulders. "I'll be back in the morning to give her a ride home,"

Okasan returned from whichever spare room she had lent her in this ridiculously old fashioned home and crossed her arms. "I suspect it wasn't the alcohol that did her in,"

"It was probably some form of date rape drug. She was doing pretty well until Tachibana bought her a drink,"

Dad raised an eyebrow at that. He was probably surprised that I hadn't decided to report Tachibana.

Tachibana was a pretty slippery one. He'd been tried last autumn but it didn't fall through. There wasn't enough evidence this time either. Plus, he might try and nail the girl with assault.

"Anyways, you head home if you're not staying the night. I'll keep an eye on her for a bit if it makes you feel better,"

I turned on my heels. It wasn't like I was actually worried about her. It'd just be a shame for her to have such a bad experience in her first week as an art student.

Okasan could read me like a book.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Fujiwara Maria<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I was stiff but not cold. In fact, I was warm and more comfortable than someone in a ditch had any right to be. I peeled my eyes open and blinked in surprise.</p>

The light was subdued through shoji screen doors and I had to wonder just where the hell I actually was. I thought for sure I'd be close to dead and in a ditch when I woke up, or worse; in someone's bedroom.

Well, I seemed to be in a guest bedroom somewhere classy.

My head was pounding and I curled into the high quality futon. It wasn't a bed but I thought it might have been more comfortable than the mattresses at the boarding school I used to attend outside of London.

I tried willing my headache to go away but figured whatever that sly bastard had slipped me was a lot more potent than some fast acting sleep medication. Whatever he had used was probably illegal or at least something you had to have a prescription for.

Everything was starting to spin and I closed my eyes. I didn't care where I was anymore; I just wanted to sleep this off.

Of course, when I decided I didn't need the answers quite yet they decided to come knocking.

The shoji screen door opened from the inside and I peered up at the stranger, suspiciously at first.

That could hardly last when I found myself looking at the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen before. I couldn't help but be awed by her long, silky black, tresses. They were curled just so but I assumed her perfectly straight bangs were the natural state of her hair.

Her face was small and delicate with a welcoming smile on perfectly shaped lips. I'd love to make a sculpture of her. Painting was out of the question and a sketch wouldn't do her justice.

Her eyebrows quirked and I realized a minute had gone by without either one of us saying a word.

I sat up a little too quickly and she was at my side before the dark spots could clear from my sight.

"Hi there," I greeted dumbly.

She laughed softly, meaning no offense to me. "Hi," she returned. "I'm Kazama Ayame,"

I imagined a smaller voice but she had all the confidence a good woman should have. I already liked her.

"Um, Maria Miller, wait, Maria Fujiâ€"Fujiwara Maria," I half stammered. I'd changed my name to fit in a little better but I hadn't used my father's name in so long that I wasn't even used to introducing myself.

She passed me a glass of water and I stared lovingly at her long and perfectly filed nails. I wanted to paint them.

I took it and sipped, appreciating the cold water. My tongue felt shriveled.

"Seems like you had a rough night,"

\_You have no idea,\_ I thought to myself. "I honestly thought I was going to wake up somewhere unpleasant. This is definitely a relief,"

"My husband's younger brother brought you here after you ran into some trouble last night with a senior student,"

Ah, Tachibana-san. Revenge would be sweet.

I hadn't exactly figured out who she was talking about and she could see that on my face.

"Kazama Ren brought you here,"

I was feeling pretty slow right at that moment. "Oh, the model . . . Kazama Ren is your brother-in-law? Wow," figures, all the pretty people were related somehow.

She smiled, straight white teeth showing. "Would you like something to eat?"

I thought about it. I was hungry (when was I not?) but I really didn't want to intrude and eating might not have been the best choice at the moment.

Before I could reply she was up and practically bouncing to the doorway. "You can change your clothes if you don't feel comfortable in your slept-in clothes," she pointed to the clothes next to the foot of my futon and disappeared down the hall.

There was a cream pair of slacks and a light pink blouse and I guessed Ayame-san was into pale colors.

About fifteen minutes later I found myself enjoying omurice and a tall glass of iced orange juice. Seeing my large appetite she fried me up another one without even asking.

Her husband, Kazama Chikage, had joined us and I tried not to stare. He looked like Ren's twin, though Ren didn't wear his hair as neatly. Ren's might have been a little longer too . . . something about their faces didn't match up as well but the coloring was definitely the same.

Their eyes looked kind of red to me but everyone else seemed to agree that Ren's eyes were just brown.

Ayame-san had asked me a number of questions, mostly about what I liked about London and what I liked about Japan. It frequently turned into questions about the cuisine but neither one of us seemed to mind.

Her husband was more interested in my family and those questions were

a little more difficult. I explained the best that I could the reason for their divorce and then the fact that I had no aunts or uncles and recently, no grandparents either.

I thought I saw Ayame-san pinch his hand but it could have been a caress for all I knew. "Is it difficult for you?"

"Not really. My mother . . . misunderstands me a bit. She signed me up for every sport imaginable while I went to school, probably thinking that it would give us something to talk about. She was into athletics when she was in school,"

"But you were not." Kazama-san concluded. "You wouldn't be at an art school if you wanted to continue,"

I grinned. "She never really got it so the most artistic extracurricular activity she had me join was probably karate. She considered the 'girly' sports like dance and gymnastics and figure skating pointless,"

She was a hypocrite. She was probably the most feminine person I knew. She moved to London just so she could start her own clothing boutique. She even made sure all the clothes I wore were something she'd designed herself. That might have been her way of showing love but I didn't really appreciate it.

"Anyways, I felt like I'd been doing exactly what she wanted for too long and decided to move back to Japan the minute I found an art school willing to accept me. Otou-san is paying for the tuition since she's still a little mad at me,"

They mulled that over for a minute. "So what does your father do?"

I saw Ayame-san pinch him again and tried not to giggle. "He owns a resort in Hokkaido. There's a great ski slope and an onsen too,"

"That sounds wonderful!"

The corner of Kazama-san's mouth twitched into a half smirk. "Ayame lived in Hokkaido for some time,"

My response was cut off by the sound of a car pulling into the driveway. Someone walked quickly past the kitchen window and the front door opened and closed rather loudly. They sounded like they hadn't had such a joyful morning.

"Ren-kun?" Ayame called, a worried crease between her eyebrows.

He poked his head into the kitchen, his expression unimpressed. "Nee-san, you didn't have to feed her,"

Kazama-san was wearing a peculiar ghost of a smile, a knowing one that made me think I was missing some joke.

Indeed, the atmosphere had changed the moment Kazama Ren had come into the kitchen. With the three of them together I could see that they had a balance that I couldn't understand.

All the same, I ate the last bite of my omurice and swallowed down

the last of the orange juice. I guess I wasn't even worthy of being fed in Senpai's eyes.

He at least turned to look at me when he spoke to me though. "Let's go, where do you need to be dropped off to?" he scratched his hairline, messing his bangs up even more. I thought it might have been a somewhat sheepish tick.

"Campus dorm C," and whatever sheepishness disappeared.

"Are you serious?"

I nodded up at him. What was his problem now?

"Same dorm. Wish I'd known that last night. I could have left you in the lobby on a couch or something,"

Ayame-san gave him a disapproving glare which made me feel a little better, even if it went mostly unnoticed by the receiver. She sighed, "Seems Ren-kun is in a hurry,"

I stood and remembered I was wearing her clothes. I pointed at my borrowed attire, "What about this?"

"Oh, don't worry about it! Come visit us again sometime, you can return it then,"

"I will," I thought I might have made an unexpected friend thanks to the trouble from last night. Ren was tapping his foot impatiently though and I followed him out before I could make him really mad.

The whole ride back to the dorm was quiet and I spent it looking out the window and memorizing the route. I'd make Ayame-san a flower pot or something for the next time I visited. Maybe I'd make her a tea pot and matching cups instead.

I started designing in my head and before I knew it Ren was pulling into the dorm parking lot. He jumped out of the car like a cat on hot bricks and didn't waste his time waiting for me to get out.

He was stalking off in his own direction, and grumbling, by the time I got out and closed the door. He dramatically but lazily lifted his hand, hitting the auto lock on the key fob without looking back at me.

I shook my head at him. Was he always this grouchy?

"Hey!" I shouted. "I really am grateful, you jerk!"

He didn't even pretend to acknowledge me.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Uwah! Ren's an idiot =w=<strong>

4. Tell me again, how old are you?

\*\*Please review, everyone! I'm counting on you guys for support ^^

I'm extremely delighted to see renewed popularity in Hanashobu too :D  
I should really go back and fix it but I don't have the stomach for it XD\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower</p>

Chapter 4: Tell me again, how old are you?

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Kazama Ren</strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Amagiri Kyuuju was an old friend of my Oyaji. He was ridiculously tall with combed back brick red hair that made him look like a yakuza boss. Apparently he hadn't changed in the past hundred years and I could see that. His face was stony.</p>

I liked him well enough. He might have looked rather imposing but his narrow blue eyes were calm and reliable. He was pretending to be a Russian lawyer at the moment.

He spoke many languages fluently and had connections around the world. He still played by the rules, even with all his money and friends in high places.

I'd arranged to meet up with him at a small soba-ya. We sat by the door, quietly talking as we ate soba noodles in a hot broth.

"Tachibana Ryouichi is at it again. Do you think you can do anything about it, Amagiri-san?"

He chewed slowly, contemplating. The movement of his temples shimmied his fake glasses down his nose a few millimeters. "Normally, it would be difficult."

"But, if you used any means necessary it would be easy for you to find him guilty,"

He nodded and sipped his tea. "I trust that what you saw was indeed a drug used with the intention of exploiting the young woman you mentioned," he peered down into his cup. "He seems to target young and rich women. The last victim reported that her purse had been dumped out but because nothing had been taken the charges were eventually dropped,"

"I don't think she had anything on her," she just had to bat her eyelashes at her upperclassmen to get something to eat or drink. I didn't say that aloud though.

The door opened and I cast my eyes over instinctually. Amagiri did the same.

She wore her golden blonde hair up in a messy, wet, bun and her bangs pinned back with a black bandana folded into a head band. The tied end stuck up like bunny ears and I stopped myself from making a

face at her. Fujiwara Maria had seemed like someone who went the extra mile to look nice but at the moment she looked more like she was ready for bed.

I almost didn't recognize her. If she didn't have blonde hair I was sure I would have mistaken her for someone else. The clingy neon green long sleeved shirt wasn't exactly inconspicuous though.

She noticed me as well and waved shortly, her normally arched lips a straight line. She was more interested in eating and didn't stop to talk, taking a seat at the bar.

The cook sounded like he knew her as he greeted her fondly.

"Good evening! The usual, Mari-chan? Extra wasabi?"

She smiled back. "Yes, please. How's business been today, Tanaka-san?"

Amagiri nudged my arm as he lifted his tea cup to his mouth. "She is the one Tachibana tried to take advantage of?"

I drank some of the broth, still looking for noodles in the bottom of the bowl. "Yup,"

"Will she mind if I ask her some questions or do you think she would rather not talk about it?" he inquired under his breath.

I stirred the soup with my chopsticks, finding a few limp noodles. "Go ahead if you think it'll help,"

We both turned our attention back on her, probably wondering how to talk to her after we finished with our meals. I almost choked on my water and Amagiri's chopsticks remained poised in front of him. She had about five plates of chilled soba noodles.

"I can see why your mother likes her. Their appetites are rather similar," Amagiri dryly remarked.

"Thanks for the food! This smells so good!"

She dug in and it almost felt bad to interrupt her meal. We approached almost cautiously and sat on either side. Amagiri took his wallet out to pay which left me with the task of beginning a conversation.

She raised an eyebrow at the two of us but continued eating.

"You look like you haven't eaten in days," I commented. Oka-san would have punched me for saying something like that. She ate a lot as well but hated for it to be mentioned. It wasn't like she'd ever get fat, even if Oyaji and I constantly teased her about it.

She replied somewhat nonchalantly. "Might as well have. I've been in the ceramic club's workshop since ten o'clock this morning,"

She must have just come from the dorm's bath after realizing that the cafeteria had already closed. Explained the damp hair and baggy black cargo pants.

"This is Amagiri Kyuuju, a lawyer," I might as well just cut to the chase.

"Nice to meet you," if she wasn't busy inhaling the noodles she probably would have offered him her hand.

She didn't seem to be the least intimidated by the colossal man sitting next to her. It surprised us both a bit and Amagiri inclined his chin, giving her a small but friendly smile.

"Is this about Tachibana?" who was doing the chasing now?

"Are you uncomfortable talking about it?" Amagiri politely returned.

"Nah, I gave him a black eye so I can't really complain. We're mostly even now,"

I thought I might have seen a ghost of a smirk on Amagiri's normally impassive face. "Mostly even? You are not planning on doing anything that could cause further trouble to yourself?"

She grinned from ear to ear. "That's for someone like me to know and for someone like you to, hopefully, never find out."

Amagiri rested his elbows on the counter, meshing his fingers together. "This isn't the first time he has tried to victimize a young woman. Are you unconcerned?"

"No, but there isn't anything I can do. If I go to the police my parents will most definitely hear about it,"

I was about to scold her for being selfish but remembered she'd just said that she was mostly even. Just how was she planning on getting even?

"Oi, what are you planning to do to him?"

She ignored me and stacked her plates up, already finished somehow. "Tanaka-san! Thanks for the meal; I'm leaving my money on the counter!"

She quickly counted out the money and left a generous tip before walking quickly to the door, maybe trying to shake us or at least convey that she was done talking.

We followed but I could see that Amagiri wasn't going to push it any further by the way he was walking slowly. He hadn't even asked her anything, not really.

I didn't spot another car in the small parking lot. The nighttime breeze was still cool and I offered to give her a ride back to the dorm.

She pointed to a shiny green bike under the lamppost, black helmet resting on the seat. "I've got a ride,"

"Are you serious?"

She untwisted her bun into a low pony tail and pulled the full faced

helmet on, flicking the visor open. "Of course I'm serious. It's a brand new Kawasaki Ninja ZX-14R, haven't even begun customizing her yet." She jangled the keys at me, "You should see my bike back in London,"

She mounted the bike as though the thing didn't dwarf her and kicked the stand up, supporting its weight somehow. She snapped the visor down and twisted the key, revving the engine before pulling out smoothly.

When she saw that the coast was clear she took off down an empty side street and was out of sight in a couple seconds.

Amagiri ducked into the passenger seat of my meek Corolla, looking miserable in the small space. I took my place in the driver's seat and tried to keep my jaw up.

"I somehow imagined that she would be timid, but I suppose you are not interested in that girl? You've always appreciated the quieter women,"

Everyone was starting to assume that I was looking for romance.

\* \* \*

><p>A few days passed and I began noticing the Kawasaki Ninja something-or-another in the parking lot. My mind was still blown when I pictured her driving it. I never would have believed it if I hadn't seen it.<p>

Toshio caught me after class, as he always managed to on Fridays and idly chatted with me for a couple minutes, refusing to let me pass. I saw Maria walk by in the corner of my eye, her bright wardrobe managing to draw even my attention.

Toshio lost interest in me and waved crazily. "Maria! Come here for a second,"

She stopped and looked back, her glow dropping a couple levels. She waved back with a hand covered in paint. She was holding a couple abused paint brushes in the other hand.

"What's up, Toshio?"

I shot Toshio a dubious glance. He flashed his teeth at me and I felt like punching him. I didn't know what he was trying to prove but he was already pissing me off.

"Me and Ren are going drinking tonight," he invented. "Want to come? Ren's buying,"

I elbowed him. "No, we are not. You're both underage,"

Maria frowned and then recognition lit her features. "Right, the legal drinking age here is twenty."

Toshio's curiosity was ignited by that. "What's the legal age in London?"

"Eighteen,"

I snorted. "And how old are you?"

"Nineteen,"

"Really?" I snidely retorted, "Seems like you've been drinking for a lot longer than a year,"

She laughed good naturedly. "Of course. I don't think the law is really obeyed no matter where you go,"

I shook my head. "Don't let Amagiri hear you say that,"

Her lips stretched wider while still managing to look pouty. "Well, tell me where to go when you make up your mind, maybe I'll share my revenge plans,"

\* \* \*

><p>Once Oka-san heard that I was going drinking again (with Toshio and 'Maria-chan') she begged and then demanded that we drink at home. I argued that it'd be awkward for Toshio and me but she put it down by saying we'd all be drinking as people of the 'same' age.</p>

Once she made up her mind it was nearly impossible to change it so I relayed the message. I could have called it off but Toshio would have come up with some other way to nettle me.

We'd agreed to meet at eight thirty, though Toshio had arrived about ten minutes early. He was practically bouncing off the walls by the time I heard the motorcycle turn down the road.

He ran to answer the door for her but seemed more interested in her bike. He ran out of the house barefooted to drool over it.

I stood with my arms crossed, leaning against the wall as she pulled her hair out of a ponytail. She fixed her hair into two fat spirals over either shoulder without breaking eye contact with me.

I was beginning to get the feeling that she honestly didn't like me.

Oyaji came to see what Toshio was screaming about. He spotted the bike through the open front door and nodded appreciatively at the motorcycle. "Nice bike,"

He turned, uncomfortably hooking his thumbs into the belt loops of his jeans. It'd probably taken some convincing on Ka-san's part to get him to wear a T-shirt and jeans.

Fujiwara Maria had finished with her hair after fluffing her face framing bangs and was pulling off her tall belted boots by the time Toshio returned.

"Thanks for having me over," she greeted mildly as she passed, following after Toshio who clearly knew his way around the house, like it was his.

I followed after them, catching a spicy scent. I wondered if she was a chai lover like Oka-san.

Toshio skipped off to the main room while she peeked curiously into the kitchen.

"Good evening, Ayame-san! Where should I put the clothes I borrowed?"

She'd brought the clothes she'd borrowed back in a plastic bag, along with a bottle of a familiar brand of sake and a dozen chuhai. How'd she get it? Probably from a senpai.

"Maria-chan!" Oka-san stepped out of the kitchen with a sunny smile and took the clothes. "Mind the kitchen for a moment, please,"

Her cheery expression turned to a grimace the moment Oka-san turned her back and I squinted at her curiously.

She caught me looking and turned away. "Food doesn't burn in all of two minutes, right?"

I rolled my eyes and edged past her, checking the food. "You can't cook?"

"Well, I can simmer curry in a slow cooker, use a rice cooker, and boil eggs with the help of an egg timer. I guess I can make salads and sandwiches too,"

I scoffed at her. "Cooking isn't that hard."

"Trust me, anything I try to cook burns," as if to prove her point she poked a piece of meat in one pan with the spatula. It'd somehow escaped my notice earlier and was now burning onto the skillet.

I nudged her out of the way, turning the heat off and flipping it quickly. She sighed, backing into the corner to stay out of the way.

"I guess that's how you quickly became a regular at Tanaka's soba-ya,"

She was sulking now. Oka-san made her way back to the kitchen a few moments later and shooed us out.

We sat in the main room with Oyaji and Toshio quiet for all of two seconds.

"So, what do you plan on doing to Tachibana-senpai?" Toshio gushed excitedly.

She tapped her chin, as though contemplating whether or not to actually divulge that information.

"Sabotage," she pronounced. "I suppose I could look for his 'medicine cabinet' too,"

"You plan on breaking in?"

"Yeah," she made it sound like it was a perfectly normal every day routine. "The boarding school I went to outside of London made a sport out of breaking into other people's rooms. If dorm B is the

same as dorm C I can crawl through the vents,"

Oyaji already had himself a cup of sake and studied her face intently. "What do you plan on doing once you've broken into his room?"

"Dunno. We used to put salt or sugar in any resealable packages. I thought I might use diuretics instead,"

He chuckled quietly. "Is that going to accomplish anything?"

"Not really, it's when I've been doing it for a couple weeks and moving his stuff about that he's going to get paranoid and start losing sleep. I'll be satisfied just to see his hairline recede a little more,"

Toshio howled, smacking his knee. He obviously thought it was perfectly fine. "You're evil! What if you get caught?"

"I've never been caught before,"

"Are you claiming to be good at breaking and entering?"

"Technically, I'm not breaking anything. The vents are easy enough to unscrew,"

We had all had an honest laugh at that and Toshio forgave her for being a criminal. He figured Tachibana was getting what was coming to him.

Even I had to admit that it'd be funny if she actually did it. I doubted she would though. She wasn't some ninja.

Oka-san was beginning to bring out the food when Toshio decided to pass a warning onto the human.

"I wouldn't recommend getting into a drinking contest with Ren's Nee-san. She can drink more than the three of us combined," he gestured around, including Oyaji in the calculation.

"That's an exaggeration," it wasn't that far from the truth but I doubted any normal woman would be able to out drink three men. We were trying to appear normal at the moment.

She giggled anyways. It'd be bad if she ever found out but I doubted she'd find out just by watching us drink.

"Don't worry, I never drink more than I can handle,"

Oka-san plopped down next to her and handed her a glass of sake. "Don't hold back,"

I took the bottle of sake and poured a glass for Toshio. I noticed a scratch on the label and studied it for a second. I could have sworn I had been saving a bottle back at the dorm with a scratch in the same place.

Fujiwara Maria had an expectant look on her face and when she caught me staring she quickly inspected a speck of paint under one of her

long fingernails.

"When the hell did you break into my room?"

Toshio burst at that point and was reduced to a useless guffawing idiot. Oka-san and Oyaji just curiously regarded us.

"I guess I've been caught once then,"

I felt a vein in my forehead throbbing and a growl bubbling in my chest. "\_When?\_" I repeated vehemently

"Yesterday morning. I thought for sure you would have figured it out by now. I even did the dishes for you and swept the floor,"

I managed to quell my temper, somehow. I'd been puzzling over those dishes. I'd been meaning to do them when I got back later that day but when I arrived they were already cleaned and put away. I hadn't noticed the floor.

Oka-san was laughing quietly now. Oyaji wore a subtle smirk that he hid behind his sake cup.

I felt a touch of embarrassment rearing its ugly head and combed my bangs down with my fingers. It'd been a long time since anyone had managed to pull the wool over my eyes. I must have been getting rusty.

"So, you crawled through the vents?"

"Yup. They're surprisingly roomy,"

"Isn't that a little . . . excessive?"

She thought about it but shrugged. "I guess, but it's kind of fun,"

Toshio had calmed down but was looking positively rosy from the sake. "You really are a criminal!"

Even she looked like she couldn't believe he was already drunk. "It was your idea,"

Toshio straightened up a little, proud of his idea. I scowled at him, socking him in the shoulder. It was almost enough to send him sprawling but he managed not to, for his sake

"Where'd you get the chuhai?" I questioned.

She opened one to have with her set of plates that Oka-san had filled for her. "Hijima Yomi-senpai in the room next to me. I did her dishes and left a voucher for a meal at Tanaka's soba-ya. She likes my sense of humor so I think she won't be too mad when she connects the dots,"

She and Oka-san seemed to be matching paces in both food and alcohol. "Aren't you worried about being reported?"

"I only do it to friends if I know I'm going to be suspected. I doubt you or Hijima-senpai will talk about it so it won't be possible for

Tachibana to accuse me." She paused. "Well, if he's the paranoid type he might blame me. I did give him a black eye,"

Toshio was getting giggly by now. He'd only had a few glasses but his tolerance was very low.

She took his glass from him and drank it in stride. He gawked at her but didn't think to complain.

"No more," she scolded. "Friend's don't let friend's get nasty hangovers,"

He reached for the glass she had taken but she pinched his ear with her free hand.

"Walk the line or eat something first,"

"Stingy," but he wasn't sober enough to sound serious and obediently started on his food.

She had already finished hers and was downing the bottle of sake she'd borrowed from my apartment one glass at a time. She was also keeping up with Oka-san's stories about traveling to different places in Japan, Oyaji occasionally inserting his own comments.

After a while she got around to me. "I forgot to ask, what's your area of expertise in art?"

"Painting,"

"Eh, really? That's cool. I suck at painting."

"Yet you're at an art school?" I retorted.

"Well, I guess I'm not that bad at painting. It's not anything fancy but I get by,"

"What is your area of 'expertise' then?"

"Sculpting."

I had an almost anime-esque moment as I felt a heavy rock drop on my back. I was taking a class in sculpting but wasn't doing very well. Of course, I was too proud to ask for help.

She lightly touched her cheek then. "I think I'm at my limit,"

She was still handling herself well but I guessed this was what she meant when she said that she never drank more than she could handle.

Oka-san leaned into her, laying her act on thick. "Don't hold back! You can stay here the night!"

"Well . . . I suppose I can't let you guys be the only ones showing off you're stamina,"

Of course, Toshio couldn't handle his booze at all and was already asleep but I couldn't remember if it was normal for humans to be able to drink as much as she had. I wasn't really knowledgeable of that

kind of thing.

So I watched her carefully for signs of intoxication, waiting for her to actually reach her 'limit'.

It seemed like she was right though. She was drunk as a skunk the next moment, her thick blonde eyelashes fluttering. She fell asleep against Oka-san's shoulder and had her hair lightly combed until we finally decided to turn in for the night.

I realized Toshio had been planning this since at least the morning before. Did everyone want to tease me?

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Please review!<strong>

## 5. Probability

\*\*Please review everyone! Please : 'D? Also, I'll be updating on Fridays this time around and whenever the fourteenth comes around : )\*\*

\*\*ARCEE-CHAN! I love you :D\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower<p>

Chapter 5: Probability.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>There were sounds of breakfast being cooked when I woke up, which kind of surprised me. I figured everyone would have been too hung over to get up and prepare a meal.<p>

I rolled out of bed and changed into the clothes I had left from that night Ren rescued me. Ayame-san had washed them and folded them neatly; leaving them in the room I had borrowed that one time. It was almost like she knew I'd be coming back and using the room again.

The black thigh high socks had the logo \_rubric. \_pressed down the sides. The sleeves of the grey and white striped shirt had the same. The shorts were the only article that didn't have the brand obviously written on them

\_rubric.\_ was my mother's own creation and she practically forced me to wear it when I lived in London. All my other clothing brands would mysteriously disappear whenever she was around.

I'd have to start buying new clothes when I got the money and the chance but my current budget hardly covered my grocery bill. There was no point in grumbling over what I wore at the moment.

I made my way out to the kitchen, finding the three men sprawled at the table while Ayame-san cooked.

Kazama-san was massaging one temple and Ren played with a spoon as he waited for his tea to cool down. Toshio was actually resting his upper body on the table, one cheek to the cool surface. He gingerly lifted his head and switched cheeks as I watched.

"Maria?" he whimpered. "How are you?"

I took one of the remaining three chairs, plopping down. I wondered if I should be letting him call me so familiarly. I doubted he actually felt anything more than friendship towards me so I let it slide.

With my elbows on the table and my head supported with my hands I convincingly mimicked someone in pain.

"I feel like a zombie,"

"I thought you said friends don't let friends get nasty hangovers?" he roughly quoted.

"You were already too far gone by the time I rescued you," I defended.

"Liar,"

"Stop talking, my jaw is too stiff,"

"Fine," he sniffed.

"Fine," I pretended to wince, having raised my voice a little louder than I'd meant to.

We both giggled quietly at that but soon joined Ren and Kazama in their contemplating silence. The only sound came from the popping and sizzling frying pan as Ayame-san made omelettes with fried rice. I'd really missed the clever Japanese cuisine when I lived in London.

"Ready!" she stage whispered and turned from the stove, a warm smile rooted in place on her face. Seriously, how did she do it? She'd outdrunk me without breaking a sweat.

I suppose there were a few people like myself and Ayame-san who could drink alcohol like it was water. We both had crazy stamina.

Still, I was more interested in orange juice at the moment. My mouth was unpleasantly dry. I did eat two of her amazing omurice though.

Other than Ayame, everyone else just picked at theirs. Toshio barely ate half of one. He was looking a little on the green side and his black hair was a mess. He normally pushed his bangs back but they were hanging limply in his dark, purple, eyes now.

Everyone seemed to think they were blue though. I wondered what most people thought Ayame-san's eyes were? They'd probably call them hazel

or something. To me they were definitely solid, priceless, gold.

With everyone finished I got up and helped Ayame-san wash the dishes. I was livelier than the men. Poor Toshio seriously looked like he was about to be sick. He didn't even drink that much last night.

Ren stretched and stood, taking Toshio under the arm to pull him out of the seat that he was practically melted on to. "You're fine to drive yourself?"

"No," Toshio moaned. He must have owned the rust bucket in the driveway then.

"Idiot, I wasn't asking you," he was talking to me then. How unexpectedly considerate of him.

"I'm fine, don't worry,"

He appraised me for a moment but nodded in the end. I guess he deemed me road worthy.

He half dragged Toshio out to the Toyota Corolla; threatening to beat him black and blue if he threw up in his car all the while.

I finished helping Ayame-san with the dirty plates and gathered up my stuff, preparing to leave. She saw me to the door.

"I'll have to watch Toshio closer next time we go drinking," I joked before putting my helmet on.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Toshio didn't live in the school's dorm buildings like most of the students. He lived in a nice sized modern apartment. My cousin, Kazama Suzumu, lived in the same building.<p>

He was about thirty years younger than me and Uncle Chiharu's only son. I hadn't seen his older sister in a while but I figured she was living in the same area as her mother, Munehide Rin. Rin and Chiharu were divorced.

It was hard to live as long as we did and be able to stay with the same person. Of course, Oka-san and Oyaji somehow managed. They could argue pretty loudly but knew each other too well to stay mad.

I was glad for that. I was close to my parents; at least I liked to think that.

Suzumu was pretty distant from the family though. I partly blamed his occupation as a university professor.

It might just have been that he was too much like his father. Both had their faces buried behind a book fifty percent of the time.

I let myself into his apartment, ignoring the mess. There were even

books in the entryway.

I looked around, not finding him in the living room or the adjoining kitchen and dining area. There was almost a trail of books leading deeper into the back hallway.

"Suzumu?" I called. "You alive?"

There was the rolling of plastic wheels on hardwood and Suzumu's dark haired bed head appeared around a doorway. His orange eyes were accented with dark bags and he had a vacant stare. An unlit cigarette hung from his lips. He was probably grading papers from his students on God knows what subject.

"Morning," and he rolled back to his desk, disregarding my presence.

I started towards the office but stepped on something cushiony. I somewhat unwillingly turned my eyes to the floor, anticipating some long expired food item. Instead I found that I'd put my foot on a lacy black bra.

"I thought you weren't dating?"

Suzumu laughed shortly from his safe haven. "So did I, but women are tricky creatures. I see why Father didn't last long,"

I rolled my eyes. Suzumu was probably followed home and seduced, knowing him. He didn't notice anything that wasn't on paper.

I stood in the doorway, reluctant to go into the room with stacks of books that could eat me if they toppled over. Suzumu's lifestyle honestly frightened me on occasion.

"So, what's up? What do I owe the pleasure of this not entirely unexpected visit?"

Suzumu might have been a few years younger than me and little strange but I often found myself going to him for advice. I tried not to seem that transparent though.

"I just dropped Toshio off and figured I'd stop by for a bit,"

"I suppose you two were out drinking last night?"

"Yeah. He's hung over,"

"Why does he do it to himself? His father should have already plainly established that drinking is not one of their strong suits. I swear, humans are more tolerant than those two,"

I chuckled at that. Indeed. "A girl from his year out drank him,"

"Oh? I assumed you were drinking at your parents place if he was willing to drink until he was sick,"

"We were,"

"And you brought a human along?"

I glared at his back. Everyone and their damn assumptions. "That was Toshio's idea,"

He pondered that for a moment or maybe went back to correcting his students' papers. "I thought Toshio of all people would understand how difficult having a relationship with a human is . . ."

"How are you any different?" I retorted.

"The owner of that delightful lacy garment is a dragon," he cut in sharply.

Well. "That's . . . nice?" I cleared my throat awkwardly. "I think he just wants to irritate me anyways,"

"So you do like her?"

"No," I was getting pretty frustrated now and was glad that Suzumu was a forgiving kind of man. "I helped her out a while ago when a senior drugged her at a drinking party,"

"And now everyone thinks that the mighty bachelor Ren is thinking about dating after . . . how many years? I don't care to count anymore," he wrote a note on the corner of a sheet and continued. "Is she interested in you?"

I snorted. "She owns a Kawasaki Ninja and broke into Tachibana's room to put diuretics in his food and psych him out,"

He turned around, eyebrows wrinkling underneath his messy bangs. "She doesn't sound like a typical Yamato Nadeshiko from your youth. But, I wasn't asking for your opinion, I was asking for what you think is hers,"

I scratched my head, ruffling my bangs into further disarray. "I don't know. I don't get women anymore; they're either throwing themselves at my feet or trying too hard to look good."

He nodded. "I see. She is uninterested and you are subconsciously disappointed and bewildered,"

I glowered and refrained from folding my arms.

"If it's bothering you that much just date her. You had plenty of opportunities before now but have always found a way to push them off onto other men. It's not like you have to worry about getting tied down to a human. You've dated plenty of pureblooded Oni so what's one mediocre human?"

My expression must have become incredulous.

"This is not romantic advice, rather a statement of probability,"

He seemed too ruffled to continue the conversation and I left after stealing a bottle of soda from his fridge.

\* \* \*

><p>I spent most of the day driving around, window shopping. There

wasn't really much that I actually enjoyed doing but if I stayed at home I would end up painting the day away.<p>

That wasn't a bad choice but sometimes it was nice to do something else. I exercised a lot too, but only at my parents place since normal people would look at me strangely if they saw me breaking world records without straining.

I was on my way back to my dorm room now, passing by a developing plot of land, abandoned in the late afternoon. The skeleton buildings were kind of freaky when they caught the last beams of sunlight.

I flicked the sun visor down as I took a turn, putting the dying light in my eyes. A motorcycle revved loudly somewhere nearby.

I tapped the brakes and heeded a stop sign even though there were absolutely no other cars. A dark cloud covered what was left of the sun and I readjusted the visor again; night had come prematurely.

The sound of the motorcycle was still somewhere nearby, probably a street over. I put my foot on the gas pedal, about to step on it.

The sound of the bike's roaring engine suddenly became much louder, or unfiltered, and behind me it burst from a narrow alleyway.

My eyes flashed to the rear-view mirror and I watched as the back wheel spun without the bike moving. I saw the small hand let go of the brake and the bike ripped past the passenger side, maybe a foot away from my car.

It flew off the sidewalk in front of me and disappeared down the road, ducking into another alleyway with a law defying ninety degree turn.

I'd had maybe ten seconds to take it in but immediately identified it as a Kawasaki Ninja ZX 14R, a green one at that. It was amazing that the full name had come to mind at a time like this.

The blonde hair that whipped from behind the driver was unmistakably Fujiwara Maria's. I noticed as an afterthought the hunched figure with his arms wrapped tightly around her waist.

"Shiranui?" it had to be him; I didn't know anyone else with a curly purple ponytail.

There was no way I could keep up with her if I was going to drive normally, or drive at all. Instead, I followed a hunch.

I pulled into my parent's driveway, maybe fifteen minutes later, breathing a soft breath of relief when I spotted her bike, still in one piece. I'd been worrying that she was going to crash somewhere.

I got out of the car just as the front door slammed. Maria jumped the three porch steps and stormed past the tall flowers along the walkway, causing them to sway gently.

She chucked her helmet viciously at the lawn. Her blonde hair was

tucked out of sight, hidden under a black paperboy cap. I hadn't been paying attention to what she'd been wearing earlier but I was pretty sure that she was wearing one of Oka-san's tracksuits now.

"What happened?" I demanded to know.

"I'm going home,"

I grabbed her wrist on impulse but she snatched it back quickly, taking off in a natural, experienced, jog. I hadn't forgotten that her mother forced her to be athletic. She'd probably treated my firm grip just now as another opponent's in karate, not someone's who was concerned.

I could go after her but I doubted she would be civil to me.

So I entered the house instead to fine out the story from someone inside.

Oyaji was fuming, an angry crease between his blonde brows. "You're really useless, involving that girl, letting her rescue you!" he spat.

I raised an eyebrow at Shiranui who sat there (at the kitchen table, like a boy getting a scolding) taking it in stride. He didn't look like he was going to be repenting any time soon. I didn't think remorse was a word in his vocabulary.

Shiranui caught my gaze and rolled his eyes at Dad. Dad looked like he wanted to stomp on his face.

"It's not like I needed to be saved. I might have looked like I was in a tight spot but I was about to pull out my gun and show those brats who was boss. Then she showed up out of nowhere and shouted for me to get on and I was like, 'Sure, why the hell not?' It's not my fault she has a hero complex or something,"

Oka-san was patting Oyaji's arm to calm him down. I didn't understand what had nettled him so much but assumed he just didn't want to clean up another one of Shiranui's messes.

"What happened?" I wanted the full story.

Shiranui took his eyes off Oyaji, probably hoping Oka-san would keep him from plowing into him. He directed his attention at me instead, grinning more crookedly than I'd seen in a while.

"Well, to start, there were these Kitsune that me and Kaname apprehended a couple days ago. It would seem that there were more and they caught me alone and were probably gonna try to off me with their knives," he waggled his gun, which he hadn't put down. "But I had this with me and was about to pull it on them when that crazy little bitch came out of nowhere and practically ran half of them over! It was crazy!"

"Practically?" I asked.

"I don't know what she did. She hauled on the brakes or something and the back tire swung around and then there were flying foxes. After that I jumped on the bike and just tried to stay on the damn thing.

We were speeding down alleyways and screeching tires on ninety degree turns!"

"I saw," I dryly remarked. He was way too excited.

"Anyways, she brought me here before I could ask and it all went to hell from there. She saw the gun and started cussing in English or something,"

Oka-san was trying her best not to giggle, probably because her husband was stewing next to her. "I tried to calm her down but she declared she'd had enough crazy for one day and ran out the door,"

I saw that too. "Why'd she leave her bike?"

Oyaji looked like he might start billowing smoke from his nose any second. "They had both the cops and a group of 'gangsters' after them. Luckily, Shiranui thinks that they couldn't get her plate number because they were moving so damn fast. Maria apparently has a new plate coming and plans on customizing her bike eventually, making it indistinguishable."

"She knows how to think, that one," Shiranui added, earning him a punch in the gut.

"Your father's going to call Amagiri and see if he can pull some strings as well,"

I shook my head and turned to leave. "I can see we're going to have our hands full with that girl," my parents might have been more attached to her than they cared to admit.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Please review everyone! If I don't get some reviews soon I'm going to happily flip a table :D<strong>

\*\*Chapter 6: Who holds the leash?\*\*

6. Who holds the leash?

\*\*Please review!\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review, Hikiri :D I had this brewing in my head for a while and had to get it down on paper X3\*\*

\*\*Thank you, my unknown Guest~ I see people going back and reading Hanashobu but then it seems like no one is reading Exotic Flower T.T So thanks a bunch! I really appreciate it! \*\*

\*\*Exotic Flower is going to be 25-30 chapters long and I'll be updating every Friday and whenever the fourteenth roles around! I wouldn't be 14Phantom if that wasn't the case ;D I predict that the last chapter will be December 14th, the same date that I posted the first chapter of Hanashobu!\*\*

\*\*Also, I plan on working on a one-shot series for side stories centering around the Hanashobu and Exotic Flower universe~ Don't know when I'll start posting it but it'll definitely also be on a

fourteenth ;D\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower</p>

Chapter 6: Who holds the leash?

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV</strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I was beginning to see a shortage of money between the gas for my bike, food for my stomach, and supplies for my various art courses. I was paying for the room in campus dorm C too. All that on a monthly allowance through a card that Mom was paying for. Thank God Dad was paying for my tuition.</p>

Guess it was time that I started looking for a part time job. I didn't have a clue what kind of job would suit me though. I couldn't see myself working at a regular store.

Class was over for the day, for me at least. I passed Tachibana in the hall and caught his eyes dart to mine suspiciously for the briefest of moment. He caught on quickly. I'd actually mixed up some realistic blood in the cooking club's kitchen and dripped it over his futon earlier.

He was pretty pale. Tired, maybe?

Ren turned the corner next, coming from a class with Tachibana. I flashed him an innocent grin and he rolled his eyes at me. I swore I saw the pucker in his ever frowning lips smooth out for a millisecond.

"Senpai looks like he's been seeing ghosts,"

We both jumped. I hadn't seen him appear but Toshio was leaning against the wall next to us, looking perfectly natural. He had skills. Ren's glower returned tenfold and he seemed to be itching to punch him.

"Are you two finished for the day? Me too! Let's go to a cafÃ©!"

"Eh?" Toshio normally let me know in advance when he planned to play with (annoy) Ren.

Ren wasn't going to bite today either. "I'm busy,"

Would his excuse cut it though?

"Let's go!" nope.

He poked and prodded us all the way to Ren's Corolla and I thought Ren might just have been too lazy to actually object today.

"My bike," I cried. "At least let me get my helmet!" I didn't like to

leave it for indefinite amounts of time.

Either way I was pushed into the passenger seat and Toshio climbed into the back. He stretched between us, pointing to the horizon.  
"Nearest maid cafÃ©, GO!"

Ren snorted. "Like hell I'm eating at a maid cafÃ©,"

All the same, he seemed to be humoring Toshio today. We ended up at a cafÃ© with waitresses and waiters in smart uniforms. I thought it might have been weird that they were all wearing glasses.

It wasn't that busy so we got a window seat set for two. Toshio lifted another chair over soundlessly. I thought he was stronger than he looked, especially when I pulled out my own. They were pretty sturdy.

A waitress in a grey pencil skirt and pale pink blouse weaved through the maze of tables towards us, heels clicking. She passed out the menus and set an extra place for Toshio.

She was all smiles as she pinched Toshio's ear. Her eyes were curiously black and I studied them for a moment, unable to find the line between her pupils and irises behind her glasses. I didn't even see a rim for contact lenses either.

"Toshio-sama, I haven't seen you in weeks. You aren't cheating on me with another waitress, are you?"

He chuckled nervously. "No way, Hana-chan! Ita-ita-ta!"

Still pinching his ear she turned her dazzling smile on Ren and me. "Have you already decided or would you like a few more minutes, dear customers?"

"Just a coffee, black, please." If I went all out here I'd run out of money before Mom could add more to the card at the end of the month. If I bought something small to eat I'd just make myself hungrier.

Ren had been browsing the menu for a couple minutes already, ignoring the exchange between the waitress and Toshio. "Three omurice, two Thai curry dishes, three slices of cherry cheesecake, and three strawberry milkshakes," he casually named off.

The waitress, without batting an eyelash, wrote all of that down. I was silently seething. He ordered all that on purpose. Maybe the joke was on me today. I had confided to Toshio earlier that I was hungry.

"Earl grey tea for me, please," Toshio chirped. The waitress smacked him with her notepad.

"Senpai," I grumbled when she had gone. "You're too cruel,"

Ren shrugged. "Toshio might have mentioned that he's been hearing your stomach during class. Are you on a diet or something?"

He didn't mean that he was buying all of that food for me, did he? I felt a blush creeping up my neck. Plus, the actual reason was much

more embarrassing.

"I'm not dieting," I mumbled.

"Then what?"

"Ran out of money . . ."

"What?"

"Geez! I ran out of money for the month,"

He dared to smirk then. "Don't worry, only someone like you or my mother would be able to eat that much at once,"

"You'll share then? Yay!" I didn't care that he flinched. Was I overly enthusiastic? I had a feeling that he was kicking himself, mentally.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Toshio disappeared after eating an omurice and Thai curry. Apparently he'd seen a girl that he wanted to talk to.<p>

I'd slipped up earlier but she didn't seem to have noticed. Why would she think that my 'sister-in-law' who eats a lot was the same as my 'mother' who also eats a lot, according to me?

She was sipping on her second milkshake after devouring both of the remaining omurice and two slices of cake, Toshio's loss for abandoning us halfway through. I'd eaten a Thai curry and a slice of cake. I was debating giving her my milkshake but figured even she would get sick after all that she'd already had.

"Thanks for the food, Senpai!" she winked at me boldly. "You've changed my opinion of you,"

I scoffed. "You're really simple,"

"So what?"

"Why don't you just ask your parents for more money?"

"You're not very tactful," she chastised.

I sat back, waiting for her to elaborate on either herself or my flaw. Either would have been entertaining.

"For the same reason I don't dare go to the police or even the hospital. My mother will definitely hear about it. She'd turn the smallest thing into something remarkable and use it as an excuse to reel me back to her side in London." She sighed heavily. "If I ask for more money she'll complain that I can't manage my money. But I'm not that bad! I just eat a lot . . ."

"I can see that,"

She pouted at me and swallowed the rest of the milkshake in a few gulps. That was exactly why she wouldn't be able to argue if I ever let slip that I thought she was a glutton.

"Why not ask your old man?"

"I'm not really close to him. I'd feel lousy asking when he's already paying for my tuition and handling all of my papers."

I could probably never understand her weariness. I knew not everyone had parents like me (I wasn't exactly a kid!) but I still found it difficult to understand the tension between her and her mother.

"I think that bastard Toshio's left us," I checked my pockets until I found my wallet. "Where should I drop you off? The school?" I wondered if that bike of hers drank a lot of money in gas. Going by the way she drove it, it probably did. "If you're having trouble with money I can at least drive you to school,"

Her lips quirked up into a cat like expression. "That's okay. I'm going job hunting after this,"

I felt my lip twitching but tried not to smirk. She looked like she wanted to hit me whenever I did. "If your mother's watching so closely don't you think she'll notice you getting a job?" I couldn't think of any ways she could use that against her offhand but if her mother was really as bad as she said . . . who knows?

"I plan on finding a job deeper than she normally looks,"

Crawling through vents to break into peoples' rooms, rescuing Shiranui from angry demons; it wouldn't surprise me if she got a job with the yakuza.

\* \* \*

><p>I dropped by my parents place, as I often did. Sometimes I played shogi against Oyaji. Not today though, there seemed to be a quiet hum in the front room.</p>

"Nii-san," Nanami greeted. She'd taken to cutting her hair short, styling it modernly with her bangs pushes to one side.

We had the same red eyes and light skin but her appearance became much more striking with her black and green sheened hair.

Her husband, my childhood friend and rival, was present as well. Hijikata Souji sat quietly, sipping tea. What an infuriating man.

"Yo,"

"What's up, Souji?"

"Aren't you in a good mood," he observed.

"Do you have a problem with that?" an egg could have fried on my forehead. There was something about him that just pissed me off. It didn't matter how many years passed, it seemed my temper would always

flare when he was in the vicinity.

He smiled. "Of course not. I just heard from Toshi that you were out on a date with a girl,"

Funny that I hadn't noticed that little rat until now. I glared at him, swearing to beat him up a little, later though. "Toshio was with us until he decided to go skirt chasing,"

"I was not chasing skirts! I just thought it'd be polite to leave you two to yourselves. I bet you had a great conversation,"

I kicked him hard in the ass, sending him rolling. "You just wanted to leave me with the bill, you traitor,"

Souji cackled. "I haven't seen you this riled up in a while. When was the last time you raised your foot and not your fist? It's like your first crush all over again,"

Souji was definitely the only person who could piss me off like this. Oka-san put a cup of tea in my hand before I could attack him. I was tempted to throw it at him.

"So, what are you nuisances here for?"

"Shou brought some interesting information to our attention,"

No one dared call him Shou-chan anymore. Our youngest sibling was someone even we didn't want to upset.

I clamped my teeth down hard, thinking for a moment. He normally left us out of the loop, handling problems with the help that he officially had available to him. If he was telling us, people he considered to be civilians, it must have been serious.

"He didn't give many details," Souji admitted. "It might not be anything big. He's always solved his own problems,"

"He let us know, or rather warned us, of an unknown perpetrator or even group of rebels." Nanami, who always kept pace with the men in her life, seemed concerned. "Shou knows when the balance is shifting and he knows the dangers a conflict could cause in this day and age. I can't help but feel his anxiety,"

"There's always been those who would seek to upset the peace," Oka-san broke in. "But there's also always been more who pick up the pieces and put them back together,"

Oka-san had a way of smoothing out the wrinkles in a serious conversation. I hoped she wasn't calculating worse case scenarios in her head though. She really didn't have to put herself back on the battlefield this late in the game.

The dark mood had dispersed now and I was content to sit next to Souji and jab him in the side for the next hour. It'd probably turn into a brawl but I was a lot stronger than he was now.

He wasn't showing his age yet but he was still a half demon. He was beginning to slow down. I might not change in another hundred years, but the same couldn't be said for everyone around me.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Please review! Sorry for the short chapter  
x.x<strong>

\*\*Chapter 7: Unraveling.\*\*

## 7. Unraveling

\*\*Please review!\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review, Hikiri! I glad my updates will give you something to look forwards to on Fridays and fourteenth's! Hanashobu was a six month project with a little more than a hundred thousand words. Exotic Flower should be about the same.\*\*

\*\*Also, regarding Shiranui . . . is his hair purple or blue x.x? I think it looks purple but I've seen people call it blue and indigo. Another thing, in the anime he didn't have tattoos but in the game he has some on his left arm. \*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower<p>

Chapter 7: Unraveling.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I loved art. Lots of people did. Hell, most kids grew up with an amateur collection of paints. Not me though. The houses I lived in never so much as had a single colored pencil lead.<p>

As a kid my birthday and Christmas meant clothes and more sports equipment. I could have gotten down on my hands and knees to beg for paint but I'm sure it would have gone in one ear and out the other.

Dad gave me money but I didn't dare spend it on art supplies. It would have broken my heart to find it gone in the morning. I didn't doubt that my mother would make it disappear like the clothes that weren't of her rubric. brand. Her idea of distasteful was anything that she hadn't already prepared for me.

That's why my holidays in Japan meant so much to me. I could do whatever I wanted, buy whatever I wanted. Dad owned a huge resort in Hokkaido and even gave me a small chalet all to myself. He probably did it out of guilt, seeing as he couldn't spend much time with me even when I visited.

It was my greatest treasure and he'd probably never know how much it meant to me. All of my knickknacks were stored there and I'd learned everything I knew about art lying on the warn wooden floor with paper spread out. I hoped to spend my summer holidays there and retrieve

whatever supplies were still usable.

I sighed. Summer holidays couldn't come soon enough. I'd just gotten an awful critique and by the end of it I wasn't sure if I was mumbling in Japanese or English. Probably both.

That was how I found myself sitting in the hallway with my back to a wall, waiting for the last classes of the day to let out. The lecture hall's double doors next to me let escape the sounds of a particularly boring lecture. It seemed to be on important historical artists.

I wouldn't be sitting there if Ren wasn't in that class.

Generally I tried to avoid him if Toshio wasn't around. It was easier to talk to him when I knew I wasn't the one pissing him off. He might have had a really nice face but he looked crazy intimidating when he was irritated. He kind of reminded me of a grizzly bear after hibernation.

I had warmed slightly to him though. Probably because he fed me. Not that I was ever going to admit that out loud. I argued that it was a perfectly acceptable reason to like him. Any guy who willingly fed a girl with an appetite like mine couldn't be such a bad person.

The door finally opened, the professor's last words echoing in the near empty hall. People filed out, yawning mostly. It seemed like only a few had bothered to take notes. Ren was among the majority that didn't.

He walked past me but backpedaled after doing a double take. His frown and perplexed quirk of a blonde eyebrow was comical. "What are you doing down there?"

I stood quickly and patted dust off my backside. "Nothing much,"

He suspiciously looked around, probably scanning for Toshio. He started off towards the exit, taking long strides. I practically had to jog to keep up with him.

"So, um, I was wondering if you could help me out,"

"Sounds like a pain already," he briskly replied.

My jaw dropped. What a jerk! "I haven't even given you the full story yet!"

He glanced at me sidelong, eyes smiling. "And you've probably prepared some heart breaking story to convince me to join your cause,"

I stopped and he slowed, turning to face me, lips twitching smugly.

"You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

"You realized already?"

I shook my head in disbelief. "You're a tricky one, you know that?"

He laughed. He must have been in a really good mood today. "So, what did you want?"

"I was told I paint like a kid with a paint-by-number kit,"

He chuckled quietly and I rapped him with the back of my knuckles playfully. We resumed walking to the parking lot and a whisper erupted from the group of girls smoking outside the front doors.

"If you're so great why don't you show me that you can do better? Maybe give me a few tips . . . ?" I suggested, trying not to let my desperation show.

"Actually, I've been told the same about my work with clay. Inoue-sensei thinks a child with Play-Doh can create more original works than I can,"

My image of Ren had been that of someone who did everything perfectly and competently. Knowing that he faced the same barriers as everyone else was a relief.

"So, I'll help you with sculpting and you'll help me with painting? When do we start?" I hadn't thought enlisting his help would be so easy.

"Get your stuff together and come over to my room whenever you're ready,"

"Right now? As in when we get back to the dorm?" I was really surprised now. I was sure it showed too.

"Yeah," he opened his car door and I almost ran to my bike, about five spaces away. "And don't come through the vent, you delinquent!" he called after me, teasingly. He almost sounded flirty, which wasn't a word I would normally associate with him.

Really, I wasn't used to seeing him in a good mood.

\* \* \*

><p>An hour later I was trying out a technique Ren had recommended. He thought it would suit me since I did a lot of work with flowery scenery. Now he watched me from the other side of the low table, finally quiet after picking apart both my style and posture for a better part of the hour.<p>

He was just as bad as my critique session, more infuriating even! At least the sensei hadn't been sipping coffee.

"Doesn't your hand cramp when you hold your brush so stiffly?"

I looked curiously at my grip, not finding anything wrong with it. I twirled the brush between my fingers but stopped after noticing a couple of splats on my practice page. "Not really," I answered after much deliberation.

"Whatever then . . . watch the direction of the bristles, your brush strokes are getting uneven again."

I pinched my lips together sourly. I knew I was the one who asked for help but he could have been a little kinder or something. It didn't help that he was staring a whole through my hand now, as though willing it to understand what he was saying.

"Did you find a part time job after?"

He was just full of surprises today. I hadn't thought him capable of casual conversation.

"I did," I was steadily losing interest in the painting now. I was getting hungry too. "It's right up my alley,"

He half smirked at that. "Do I dare ask what you do?"

I giggled. "It's a secret," I wondered if he'd disapprove if he knew?

"That just sounds suspicious," he grumbled.

Oh yeah, Mother Hen would definitely disapprove. I had to grin at my clever new name for him.

"The pay is great though," I could probably move out of the dorm and into a nicer apartment. "How about I treat you to supper? It's only fair since you treated both me and Toshio the other day,"

His expression turned reluctant and I could tell an excuse was on the tip of his tongue.

"Don't give me that look," I whined. "I know a great Italian restaurant! The food is great, I promise!"

He sighed. "I suppose you won't be getting much work done now that you're stomach is growling,"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I drove her since it looked like it was going to rain. She'd said she didn't mind driving in the rain but made it sound like I was insisting that we go together. I thought that she might have been treating it as a date but figured she wouldn't be paying if that was the case.<p>

On the way back I asked her if she even had a car license.

"No way! Can you see me driving a car?"

"I guess not," not anymore, at least. She'd forever look out of place in the driver's seat to me, thanks to my image of her flying down the street with Shiranui hanging onto her.

"What about winter?"

"If the roads aren't bad I'll still drive my bike, and it's not bad as long as the roads aren't too icy. If they're slushy or anything

like that I'll just walk. I suppose I could even bum rides off you,"

I snorted. "I hate to wait, just so you know. If you're late I'll leave without you,"

"Not such a reliable driver, are you?" she tutted as we pulled into the dorm parking lot. It was surprisingly empty for seven in the evening.

"I really need to find an apartment with underground parking or something,"

"Worried about your bike?"

"Of course. I only have a tarp for it. If the wind picks up and my baby falls over I won't know what to do,"

I had to scowl. I'd probably never get people who obsessed over their vehicles. My eyes wandered to an unfamiliar two door parked to our right. There was a tall foreigner with curly brown hair leaning against it. I could have sworn he was looking straight at Maria.

She looked over after a moment, having noticed that I seemed to be locked in a staring contest with him. Of course, she realized it was her that he was intently appraising.

I walked around the front of the car and she edged closer to me, nervousness buzzing in the air. The first step we took towards the building stirred a rise from the silent observer.

"\_Good evening, Miss Maria Miller,\_" he greeted in English. I knew a little.

Maria frowned at him, avoiding his storm cloud eyes. "\_Do I know you?\_"

He laughed, narrow eyes twinkling. "\_No, but I know you,\_"

She inched closer still to me, seeming repulsed by the stranger. "\_Are you a friend of my mother's?\_" she fingered something in her pocket.

Maria was armed and I suppose he didn't doubt that she would use whatever she had if he continued to freak her out. My presence probably helped too.

"\_Don't be so defensive,\_" he opened his door and sat heavily in the seat. "\_I was just greeting you.\_" With that, he shut the door and started the car, pulling out of the parking lot.

"A friend of your mother's?" I repeated in Japanese, curiously.

"I don't think so," she chewed her knuckle and cast her gaze about. "He certainly had a nice creep factor going on,"

"What's in your pocket?"

She elbowed me. "Pepper spray; maybe you'll think twice about putting your hands on me now," the joke helped lift the atmosphere.

I rested my arm across her shoulders, crushing her to my side. I'd decided to treat her a little less antagonistically, even let our relationship go as far as it could.

"Hey!" she insincerely complained, shoving me lightly.

"Thanks for treating me to supper," the least I could do was escort her to the supposed safety of the dorm. I'd have to keep an eye and an ear out for the unwanted guest too.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Shiranui's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I was crashing at my nephew's place after getting into a scuffle with a small gang of younger demons. Admittedly they weren't the only ones who ended up bloody.</p>

Keisuke looked like he wanted to boot me and his older brother, Akira, out. Keisuke was a high school teacher at the moment. I bet the kids thought he was as stifling as an old man. He even dyed his purple hair black.

Akira might have been the older sibling but he still behaved a bit like a kid. He was good backup though and I often brought him along with me, even if my younger brother and his wife didn't want to see him get involved with the Agano like I had.

He had his mother's brown hair though it was wavy like mine and his father's. He wore it in a short twisted ponytail, mimicking me.

"Kyou-nii, at least change into something else. You're getting blood everywhere,"

There was no way I'd let anyone call me Oji-san, even if I was technically his uncle. On the other hand I was contemplating the sudden change in the attitude of young demons.

I suppose, if I were just a young demon unaffiliated with any cause I'd be pretty pissed too. The Agano had made themselves into a sort of communist group and while they were generally fair they also made sure that their rules were followed absolutely. Lots of demons had a problem with their authority.

It might even have been another group of demons trying to rise up and push Agano aside, finally tired of their one-sidedness.

Akira was raiding the fridge while Keisuke tried to lecture me and came back with a can of beer for me. I popped the tab and clicked cans with Akira. Keisuke looked horrified.

"I don't drink beer! Where did you get it?"

Akira laughed. "From your fridge, little brother. I hid it behind the milk and orange juice containers,"

Keisuke was about to check when the door opened. Even before we could deduce who had come I found myself at knife point. Agano Kaname's wolf yellow eyes glinted hatefully at me.

"The hell!" Akira cursed, flicking out his pocket knife. "What's your problem, Kaname?"

Kaname pulled a handgun out but didn't point it at Akira. My eyes focused on Keisuke who was aiming a revolver at him in return. Wow, I hadn't thought he had the balls to do something like that.

"Oi, oi. Let's all calm down now," I interrupted. I must really have been getting old. It wasn't like me to be the negotiator.

"Shiranui-san, where's your sniper rifle?"

"Which one?" I had a couple. What did he want them for? I was starting to understand the situation though. Looks like someone had been shot that wasn't supposed to be. Naturally I'd be the first to be suspected if it had anything to do with our part of the underworld.

"I don't care; I just want to see them,"

I stepped forwards, trusting him to move his knife. "You're in luck then, I actually keep them here,"

Keisuke's eyes got round. "What! Are you serious?"

I knelt and pulled up a loose board. I moved a couple others aside and let Kaname examine the four guns I kept under the floor.

He bent down and sniffed the chambers. "They haven't been used in a while," he pronounced carefully.

"Hell no, not since that mission on New Year 's Eve," I confirmed. They were nice guns but I definitely wasn't just going to use them for no good reason. I didn't want to get caught by the surface world.

He put the guns back and hung his head. "I'm sorry for causing you trouble,"

Akira was sputtering. "What the hell happened? You can't just barge in like this and start waving guns and knives at us!"

Kaname bowed deeply. "Elder Matsuki Hiten was killed. He died from a bullet fired almost two thousand meters away,"

"Did Elder Matsuki even have enemies?" something wasn't right. Why kill an old demon like Matsuki when he was already nearing the grave? He didn't even have that many responsibilities as an Elder.

"None that we know of. Father wants to catch the culprit as soon as possible to ensure that there are no further deaths,"

It seemed to me like the winds of change were blowing again.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Please review, everyone!<strong>

\*\*By the way, is anyone interested in beta reading Hanashobu? I'm looking for someone who has undeniably better grammar and an eye for typos and incorrectly spelled words. I also need someone who will point out poorly executed scenes and advise me -without batting an eyelash- on how to change such scenes, preferably while understanding that it can't deviate too far from the original course. The same can be said for Exotic Flower.\*\*

## 8. Hungry Bear

\*\*Please review, everyone! I really love reading your comments : 'D\*\*

\*\*Thanks a bunch, Arcee-chan! Honestly I don't have a lot of work done on him x.x so I can't really say anything with much certainty XD I just know that he's a bigger troll than I am ;D\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower<p>

Chapter 8: Hungry Bear.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I had a bit of a dilemma on my hands.<p>

The old saying 'easier said than done' was really starting to apply to Suzumu's advice. I hadn't dated in years and I was no doubt less experienced than she was which honestly made me feel rather . . . reluctant. I'd only seen relationships from afar recently and had absolutely no idea what she was looking for.

More than that, relationships generally meant secrets got found out, even if you tried your damnedest to bury them. I didn't particularly want to lie to her about my true nature either, nor did I especially want her to know. The Agano had a pretty strict policy about letting humans know about our existence too.

Further still, I didn't want to end up like Souji's parents. Knowing that any children we had would be awkwardly caught between two very different societies was bad enough . . . then I had to consider that Yukimura Chizuru had put herself in a very early grave.

Shou was alright though and his wife had died just after the Second World War. He'd been pretty much the same as he always was after that, maybe a little more taciturn. It probably depended on the person.

Why was I even having these thoughts?! I banished them as best I could and started on my soba again, now lukewarm.

There was no point in the silly musings. I'd already decided to let our relationship go where ever the hell it felt like going and if I ended up with cold feet I'd just push her away. She was pretty; it wasn't like she'd have any trouble finding someone else.

The bell over the door rattled but without turning around I never would have assumed another person was in the building. Whoever it was didn't make a sound as they walked; not a creaking footstep or a rustle of fabric.

I was thinking it was rare for such a person to be around in this day and age. I'd only met a handful of humans who had achieved stealth worthy of praise, all of whom were six feet under now.

Tanaka, who'd been prepping the front counter for the third time since I had entered, looked up to see who was silently approaching behind my back. The subtle change of the wrinkles around his eyes prompted me to look up as well.

He was, undoubtedly, a foreigner. His hair, fake at first glance, was real and no pureblooded Japanese human had hair that color.

It was redder than Amagiri's and I thought it might have been a dye job. It just didn't go with the overly formal grey pinstripe suit he was wearing though. On closer inspection I realized even his eyebrows were red through his uneven bangs.

I turned back to my food, not wanting to stare at the poor man. I could sympathize with him; I was accustomed to being stared at, thanks to my natural hair color.

An awkward moment seemed to pass between Tanaka and the man. Tanaka had welcomed him but the man had yet to reply in any way. He probably couldn't speak Japanese.

"\_Excuse me,\_" I started clumsily, wishing I had actually put some effort into learning English when I had the chance. "\_W-would you like the same?\_" I gestured to my dish. "\_Just noodles,\_" and stumbled my way through what I guessed was the rest of the ingredients.

"\_Yes, thank you,\_"

He didn't particularly look grateful or anything but handed me a handful of bills, completely trusting me. I counted out enough for the same thing I had ordered and pushed it towards Tanaka. The rest I handed back to the foreigner.

"He'll have the same thing as me,"

Tanaka nodded and the man took the seat next to me, waiting for his meal. I was still having a hard time believing that the red hair he sported wasn't dyed.

The quiet of the Soba-ya at eight o'clock had been bearable until he had arrived. Now it was just stiff. It would have been so much easier if Maria was around to properly speak to him.

The thought turned stale when I remembered the man from the other day. I was still fishing for his connection to Maria but her answer

had remained the same. She didn't have a clue who he was either.

At the moment, Maria was prepping the ceramic club's room for my 'lesson'. She probably hadn't even eaten supper yet.

Tanaka came from the kitchen with the soba for the literally red-headed man. He set it down without a word and even plucked a can of coke from the icebox behind the counter.

"Tanaka-san, can I get three plates of cold soba to go, with extra wasabi?"

Tanaka smiled so widely that I noticed he was missing a molar. "Ordering supper for that girl?"

I thought he might have just been teasing me but figured that he was still weary of the stranger. His unease was rubbing off on me. I suppose I would refer to her as 'that girl' as well for now, if I had to.

"You better bring her four plates if you think she's hungry," Tanaka suggested. He rested his elbows on his side of the counter and leaned towards me. "Say, Ren-kun, when are you going to confess your attractions to that girl?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Tanaka-san,"

He chuckled but moseyed off to the kitchen to prepare Maria's lunch.

While I waited his Western customer finished his meal. He finished sooner than I'd expected him to and he'd even eaten it with chopsticks. I slanted my gaze to watch him go, still feeling a twinge of suspicion towards him.

I met his eyes and felt every muscle in my body clench. It wasn't until he stopped looking over his shoulder and exited the Soba-ya that I felt my body become un-petrified. My skin was still crawling though.

His eyes had been a regular and everyday brown up until I caught him looking back at me over his shoulder, just as curious as I was. His narrowed eyes had flickered, revealing a tainted golden glow set in black sclera.

Well, I was getting awfully dull. I'd sat next to an unknown demon for a whole meal and hadn't even realized it, albeit he was probably a kind of demon I was totally unfamiliar with. He might have been extremely old as well. Older demons were always better at hiding their presence.

I wondered if I should tell Shou. Then again, there were demons everywhere now. Japan wasn't the only place in the wide world that was experiencing growth in the demon populations.

Hell, whatever had brought him to Japan was definitely much simpler than plotting against Shou. Lots of demon were very rich and influential due to their experience and accumulated wealth.

"Ren-kun? I have Maria-chan's order ready,"

I snapped out of my reflection and handed Tanaka his money, thanking him for the meal before briskly walking to my car. Maria wanted me to be there before nine o'clock.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>It was probably a miracle. I had subjugated the most intimidating person I'd ever know into sitting and kneading clay without complaining. I'd given a bit of a speech at the beginning and apparently he was taking me seriously. I kind of felt bad since most of it had been exaggerated.<p>

He even bought me supper. I was beginning to see that he was actually kind of sweet. He was a bit heedless when he picked his words and had an attitude that screamed 'I don't give a damn!' but underneath it all he seemed to be a deep thinker. It was rather unexpected.

So, this time around I got to enjoy my soba with my feet kicked up and pick on Ren. "Put your back into kneading that clay!" I felt safe enough with the table between us to laugh at the glare he sent my way.

I didn't want to seem like a completely horrible teacher though and finished my soba quickly and cut off a fresh chunk of clay. I sat across from him and showed him the most common and reliable technique.

"Put all of your weight into it as you flatten it down and out with the heels of your palms. Bring it back in and compress it back into a lump before repeating," his eyes were on me and if I wasn't working on my own clay I probably would have begun fidgeting. "Don't let the clay get too warm. Two or three minutes is generally a good amount of time to spend on it, if you're fast."

He got the rhythm down after that.

"So, what do you want to try first? Hand building or the pottery wheel? I personally like the pottery wheel the most,"

"I've never used a pottery wheel," he admitted.

"Then let's start with that," I decided. "You've been missing out on half the fun!"

We moved away from the tables and I sat him down at the best wheel in the room. It was electric with a foot pedal like a sewing machine. I didn't mind the kick-wheels but I doubted he'd be able to keep the speed constant and remain steady.

I threw my own clay down with a thwack on another nearby wheel, also electric. His eyebrows were wrinkled slightly and he seemed to be contemplating his wheel intensely.

"Just throw it down in the center. Make sure it sticks,"

I left mine and pulled a seat over, sitting on the opposite side of his wheel. "Mimic me,"

He somewhat cautiously leaned over the wheel, watching me with uncertain ruby eyes.

"Start the wheel slowly and begin shaping it into a cone. Keep it as close to the center as you can," I instructed.

He obeyed without a word, gently putting his foot on the petal.

"Slow down just a little and move your elbows in closer, resting them on your thighs if you can."

He was pretty situated for a while now. I considered going back to my clay but decided to continue watching him. He was still fighting with the clay to get it centered.

It was kind of funny, what with his super serious façade. He'd even pinned his bangs back with a medium sized French barrette clip. I was struck by just how long his eyelashes were. They were as blonde as his hair and eyebrows so I hadn't really noticed before now.

There were no two ways about it; he was gorgeous. A chin just the right size for lips with a sullen pucker and hidden Cupid's bow; cheekbones just high enough for the straight bridge of his nose; a slight and just barely upturned nose for that haughty holier-than-thou attitude; and eyes just deep enough to get lost in. Absolutely yummy.

I prayed that he wouldn't ever get the chance to be inside of my head for even a millisecond. I couldn't help but analyze his appearance in my spare time. It was kind of embarrassing, really.

While I'd been lost in thought he'd gotten the clay to behave a little better.

"Alright, wet your hands and the clay until it's thinly coated. Use your left hand to sort of cup the side of the clay and press your elbow into your thigh to keep it steady. Increase the speed of the wheel and press down on the top with the palm of your right hand."

There was a slight wobble and he crinkled his nose, unsatisfied. I leaned over from my side of the pottery wheel and pressed his guiding hand a little firmer against the clay. The wobble faded away a bit and I drilled him for a while, showing him how to bring it up and push it down. He even managed to make a sort of bowl, with my help.

After removing it from the wheel I set it aside to firm up. I doubted either one of us would be back to finish it in the next couple of days. The members of the ceramic's club would probably just throw it away.

I called it a day and we hung our borrowed aprons up, washing the clay off our hands and forearms. He'd somehow gotten a long streak across his cheek as well.

He didn't say much for a while, just helped me carry my stuff out to his car. I'd brought a whole bunch of stuff that we hadn't even bothered with.

"That was interesting, and surprisingly easy."

I assumed that was as close as I was going to get him to saying the word 'fun'.

"If it's just a basic shape then yeah, it is pretty easy. If you add glazes I'm sure you can impress Inoue-sensei and with your painting skills it'll be a piece of cake to disguise small blemishes."

The drive back was pretty quiet again. He didn't seem to like talking while he drove. He seemed like a pretty good driver but I was wondering if he was actually a nervous driver.

He parked close to the front door and stepped out, jangling his keys idly. I'd brought too much crap and was having a bit of trouble getting it organized. I couldn't even open the door and imagined I was wearing his patience thin.

Needless to say I was surprised when he opened the door for me and even took everything I'd managed to fit into my left hand. He tucked it into the crook of his elbow and effortlessly pulled me out by the hand he'd freed up for me.

I suddenly had a scene from *Howl's Moving Castle* playing through my head; the one where Howl took Sophie's hand and started walking through the air. Boldly, I decided to keep hanging on, too determined for a blush to appear on my face.

For a minute I was anticipating him to shake me off or something equally embarrassing but soon enough we were walking through the dorm's front doors. The blood was starting to rush to my head though and I was extremely glad no one seemed to be around.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the floor, half afraid of tripping up and half unwilling to look up to see the expression on Ren's face.

The first set of stairs appeared in my peripheral vision and I almost groaned. My room was on the second floor while his was on the first. That kind of sucked.

I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I didn't at least peek at him now. Plus, I'd be up all night wondering what he was thinking without even being able to decipher the look on his face.

I was quietly relieved. He didn't look disgusted or mad or irritated or even bored, like I thought he would. He looked . . . thoughtful? Honestly, I wasn't exactly familiar with many of his emotions.

"Is this alright?" I shyly asked, squeezing his hand a little.

"It is," he softly replied, his dark red eyes smoldering somewhat. It wasn't an angry burning-a-hole-through-you look though; more like: I'm-staring-at-you-and-you-better-like-it.

He looked away for a minute but there it was again! The hungry bear look, only it was a little different this time. I felt like I had cotton stuck in my ears after that and I could feel a blush burning on my cheeks.

I could understand why I was frequently the target of glares from the girls in my classes. Anyone would swoon if they had Ren looking at them so intently. I'd be jealous too if I saw him looking that way at anyone else.

Wordlessly he handed me back my supplies and gifted me with a teasing half smile. "Thanks for the lesson,"

Yup, I was officially the luckiest girl in art school.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Please review! This chapter seemed kind of strange to me o.o<strong>

9. The path we're on

\*\*Please review, everyone!\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review, Hikiri! I'm glad you liked the last chapter XD I thought I was going out on a bit of a limb with that hyphenated sentence x.x\*\*

\*\*Hikiri!~ You like Blue Moon by fallingwisteria as well? Cool :D I noticed you reviewed and said Heisuke's eyes were green, and not blue though :| The wikia says that they're blue-green, but they look pretty blue to me XD\*\*

\*\*Thanks to bobell and AliceLaw for reviewing Hanashobu! I was really blessed in reviewers for Hanashobu and even now for Exotic Flower! Thank you, everyone!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower<p>

Chapter 9: The path we're on.

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><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>It was a warm Saturday afternoon. I'd planned on calling Maria and asking her out somewhere but Toshio had come over to 'hangout' with me. In reality he was just pissing me off.<p>

"Let's go drinking with some seniors tonight,"

"Can't," usually I said 'no' but I felt compelled to say 'can't' this time. I was planning on helping Maria with her painting again tonight; maybe have a couple glasses of sake. I was glad she wasn't into drinking until she was drunk. She'd probably get suspicious if I

never got drunk.

"Why?!" he practically bawled. "We never hangout anymore! You're always gone,"

"Fine, I'll make some time to hangout with you, but not tonight."

He abruptly put on his Sherlock Holmes investigative face. "There's definitely something that you're not telling me," his little act crumbled and he grinned. "Could it be that the rumors are true and you're spending all your free time with Maria?"

Rumors? I guess no one could say for sure whether or not we were really dating. Even we hadn't determined if dating was what we were doing.

"Oh, Maria-chan! Ren's stolen you from me, hasn't he? What happened to our pure and innocent love?"

"I wouldn't call it stealing when you aren't even serious,"

His practically bit his tongue. He pushed all silliness aside, something he rarely did, and searched my expression with his prodding purple eyes. "Do you really want to go down that road?"

I glared at him. "That's none of your business,"

He stubbornly refused to look away. "Sure, you can have a short relationship and push her off onto another man when you get bored, as you've always done . . . but I won't forgive you. You can't just do that to someone like Maria,"

That would probably be the outcome of our relationship. She was a human and couldn't ever know that I wasn't. Whether I liked it or not, I'd have to break off the relationship if it set its roots too deeply.

Toshio's eyes softened a little. "She's really likeable, everyone knows that. Just don't . . . you'll be hurting yourself as well."

"It's none of your business, Toshio,"

"We're family, of course it is,"

"No, it really isn't."

I bailed on him then, not giving a damn that I'd left him to his own devices in my dorm. I trekked up to Maria's room, hoping that she was around.

The door was unlocked, which I took as a good sign, but she was nowhere to be seen. I even checked the closet, wondering if she was asleep. Her job had weird hours and she often took naps in the closet where it was at least dark between her daytime classes and time spent with me.

I noticed a piece of paper tacked to the mini fridge and inspected it. '\_Got called in by work, be back around six. Making curry for supper, be there or else!' \_ There was even a chibi Maria in one

corner swinging a kitchen knife angrily.

The low table in one corner had a slow cooker set on top of it and I checked the contents cautiously. Strips of chicken were cooking in a bright orange sauce which smelled as spicy as it looked. I could see squares of pineapple, chunks of potatoes, chopped carrots and onions, and half a dozen other unidentifiable ingredients.

It looked pretty crazy but didn't smell half bad. I didn't think it could still be considered curry though.

I lingered for a few minutes longer before heading downstairs again, deciding to go for a drive instead of going back to my room. It'd be annoying if I went back and discovered that Toshio had obstinately stayed there.

Yeah, he was worried about the both of us and I could see where he was coming from. Sure, it was nice but at the same time I wished he would just butt out. Maria knew what she was doing just as well as I did.

Actually, I didn't have a clue what was really going on.

She'd made the first move after my first lesson with clay but it'd been a really tiny step. We only held hands and agreed that it was okay. Since then we'd eaten out a few times. Many times, really, thanks to her inability to cook and the fact that I had no cooking tools in my room; I used to borrow the cooking club's kitchen but they changed their lock and I couldn't get in anymore. Other than that we watched a couple movies and worked on our art projects together.

Now that I thought about it, we hadn't even been overly romantic. Neither one of us had a TV in our room, let alone a DVD player, so we'd watched most of our movies in crowded cinemas. A few had been watched on her laptop and we kind of cuddled, but she always fell asleep after the first ten minutes.

The whole twentieth-century-relationship thing was still pretty awkward for me.

In Toshio's eyes I'd always been a bit of a ladies' man, especially during my youth. I admitted that I had courted "probably- every female Oni in my generation and even the generation after. But it was different back then; I didn't even kiss half of them before I lost interest.

I was about fifty-one, maybe fifty-two, when Toshio was born. By that time I had mostly stopped dating but he still grew up making remarks about wondering who I'd have with me next. He even asked if I was going to date his older sister.

Suzumu was the one to explain to him that I thought it was immoral to date first cousins, but went on to list off every second and third cousin I'd ever courted. The three of us had been pretty close back then.

I think it'd been during the seventies when we began to grow apart. Toshio had recently been closer, thanks to him joining the same art school but neither of us saw Suzumu unless we went looking for him.

Admittedly, I didn't check in on him as often as I should have.

After a while of driving around aimlessly I resolved to spend my afternoon browsing art supplies and even clothes.

Maria had made me go shopping with her a couple times to carry her bags for her. She wanted to replace her entire wardrobe for some reason. She'd said something about her mother picking out most it and that was reason enough for her.

There seemed to be more than just animosity between the two of them but the way Maria described it made it sound a little one-sided. She was probably just being willful.

I had absolutely nothing left to see by the time four o'clock rolled around. I pulled back onto the traffic congested road, hoping to get back to the dorms in time to put the few things I had picked up away. A shower would probably be a good idea as well.

I caught sight of two cyclists as I waited for the cars in front of me to creep along to the intersection. The tight black bike shorts and matching workout shirts sported white and green logos, a popular bicycle courier logo in the city.

Tight, spandex, clothing looked absolutely disgusting on any man. I felt bad for the auburn haired courier, forced to wear it for his job. Any job was better than none when you didn't have money though.

The other was a blonde haired woman and I felt my eyebrow begin to twitch. I was seriously beginning to think there was some higher force at work for her to continuously pop up.

While it was nice to appreciate her lithe form, especially when caught in traffic, I couldn't help but feel irritated by her casual joking with her co-worker. I doubted any guy liked to see his girlfriend flirting in broad daylight with another man.

I took a calming breath to relax my hand from the door. So what if she was cheerfully chatting with a fellow worker? Besides, if I had to blame anyone it was the shaggy haired guy. Everyone seemed to try their hand at wooing her.

The long line up of cars was still at a painful standstill and I continued to study them from afar, trying not to feel like a jealous boyfriend. I came to notice that they were both tapping away on iPhones with one hand down by their sides, discretely glancing down at them from time to time.

They must have been communicating with either each other or a third party. Maybe the inconspicuous flirting was just a cover for it. Anyone without my sharp eyes wouldn't be able to tell unless they were close enough to be spied out in return.

I hadn't probed for more information on Maria's job since she'd declared it secret but I was starting to wonder about it again. It was definitely more than a simple bicycle courier's job, what with the strange hours and even stranger behavior.

The traffic was finally loosening up, and not a moment too soon. Maria took off in one direction and the man in another. She was probably finishing up with her job and getting ready to head back home herself.

Now the big question was whether or not I should ask her about it during supper.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Shiranui's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I didn't know what time it was, but it was probably late. No one was around so I sat on the stone steps of a large shrine.<p>

Earlier, while patrolling with Kaname, I had gotten pretty roughed up. A group of young demons from a local gang had jumped me while Kaname had turned down an alleyway. I rounded up most of them myself but he still ended up scolding me for letting my guard down.

So now I was waiting for my injuries to heal a little before heading back home. Maybe I would crash at Keisuke's place instead. It was a lot closer.

A small gasp stirred the quiet air and I startled so thoroughly that I felt a tug in my gut from a bullet that had gone through and through.

"You are hurt . . . !"

I was frankly shocked that someone had managed to sneak up on me, twice in one night. My head must have really been in the clouds today.

I glared back at the unwanted visitor.

The girl's hair was slightly disheveled, blue black in the half light. Her pinned back bangs were pretty hilarious; they stuck up everywhere. I snorted. Her forehead was too small for her eyebrows.

I met her concerned gaze and put a lid on my quiet laughter. Her bright orange eyes were completely serious. I begrudgingly bowed to her.

"To think I would live to see an Oni-hime in her pajamas," I remarked offhandedly.

"Oni-hime, you say? I never fathomed I wound find a relic of the past washed up on my doorstep," she shot back. Oni-hime was a kind of teasing term nowadays. Really it just meant she was a spoiled rich girl living in the lap of luxury.

"Watch your mouth, little girl," rich or not, I wasn't about to be called a relic.

"Stay your tongue, common Oni," she retorted saucily.

"Oi," I sneered. I might have looked pretty 'common' but I wasn't about to let her sully my pride as a noble Oni either. "The Shiranui Oni haven't fallen so far as to be kicked to the ground by some coddled child,"

She smiled, as though she'd been waiting for me to lash back at her. "Forgive my impudence, Shiranui-\_dono\_. Your wounds are looking quite alright. If you would excuse me now, Shiranui-\_dono\_, goodnight."

I felt like I'd just been played. Was that some twisted form of greeting? Flirting? All that cynical aristocratic talk just to spite my name from me? Then again, it should have been pretty obvious, what with my wavy dark purple hair and eyes.

Grumbling, I trudged back to my place, forgetting all about crashing at Keisuke's place for once.

I really didn't appreciate being teased by some Ookawa Oni brat.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Supper was good, despite Ren calling it 'crazy curry'. Afterwards I scooted over to him, resting my head on his shoulder.<p>

"Are you tired?" he inquired. I enjoyed the soft hum of his voice at this distance.

"Work is pretty tough on me, especially when they call me in day and night,"

Ren leaned back, letting me use his arm and shoulder as a pillow. We were comfortably quiet lying on the tatami flooring.

He gently tugged the elastic band from my hair, taming the tangled spirals. Despite not giving a damn about his own hair he treated mine with respect. Either that or he had a hair fetish.

I hadn't really dated before now. During middle school and high school I had gone to private all-girls schools so boys had always been a giggly topic. When Mom put me in a dorm on campus to punish me for various activities (drinking, mainly) I became known as a bit of a delinquent.

Of course I was the best at sneaking out and breaking into off-limits areas so everyone just assumed I was meeting with a boyfriend. I didn't even bother telling them how bogus that was. If they knew I was actually going to the nearest arcade and even the library my reputation would suffer.

Up until my senior year I even viewed all guys as being despicable perverts, thanks to the imagination of several girls who probably had even less experience than me.

So I was immensely glad, grateful even, that Ren seemed to not mind the slow pace. I thought at first that he must have been incredibly

experienced but after a few weeks of dating it seemed like he wasn't really used to the whole idea either.

"\_Shit!\_" I cursed in English. Ren jumped a little and I sat up quickly. "I have crit tomorrow afternoon,"

He'd looked worried until I said that. Now he was trying not to laugh at me.

"This is serious!" I flew about the room like a trapped fly, rushing to get my work space in order. I dragged my bin of assorted paints and brushes to the low table, taking out a canvas that I'd been working on for at least a week now. It still looked like crap.

Ren had propped himself up on one elbow, smirking at my panicked self.

"I thought I might actually go to bed before sunrise for once, but I guess not."

He was unable to suppress his chuckling now. "This is only your first year. You'll get better at managing your time before you graduate,"

"Oh God, I hope you're right."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>This chapter was a bit of a pain to write  
e.e<strong>

\*\*You know what really makes me mad OwO? Hanashobu hasn't had a single day since December 14\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* that no hits were recorded on the stats page. Exotic Flower has at least one day a week, sometimes more, when there are no hits recorded e.e is it the title? The summary? The fact that it's a sequel?! Someone please tell me T~T\*\*

## 10. Foreign Affairs

\*\*Please review, everyone!\*\*

\*\*Thanks to Hikiri for being the first reviewer of a new chapter, yet again XD I really appreciate it!\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review, Arcee-chan! You know what? I give up on colors XD I've never been able to decide if Shiranui's hair is purple or indigo, if Kazama's is flax or ash, if Harada's is red or auburn, if Chizuru's is brown or charcoal, if Osen's eyes are . . . candy apple or orange? Seriously, if you look at the anime and then the game it becomes so hard to decide T.T\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower<p>

Chapter 10: Foreign Affairs.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Shiranui's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Sometimes I actually had to be grateful to the Agano. My little brother might have been doing fine with his wife and kids but I would probably never be able to blend in with the humans. I definitely couldn't get a normal job and I'd already exhausted my personal account.<p>

Without the money they paid me for the high risk jobs I wouldn't be able to live on my own. I would have to move in with one of my relatives then. Even if I didn't work for them I would probably still be under constant supervision.

More than a hundred years ago I had fought for my own survival through my own strength, sometimes side by side with humans. It'd started off as a debt to one clan but slowly even that became irrelevant.

In the end the two humans I respected were Takasugi Shinsaku and Harada Sanosuke. It was interesting that those two were on opposite sides and I wondered if they would have gotten along if they had ever met.

I hadn't been to Harada's unmarked grave in a long while. Maybe I would visit it when I got the time. Takasugi's too.

"Shiranui-san . . . pay attention."

"Shh!" Akira hissed.

Kaname returned to watching the gathered demons through a crack between two crates but I doubted he really cared for Akira's advice. He was itching to jump out and apprehend the offending demons.

Agano Kaname looked like the cool, collected, and patient type but was anything but that. At least, he certainly wasn't patient. He might not have spoken unless spoken to, and even then he usually stayed quiet which gave him a very servile appearance. Despite that he was incredibly fidgety and preferred straight forward tactics.

Right now we were gathering intel, watching a group of suspicious demons meeting in a sketchy warehouse.

Akira was really the only one taking this seriously, his hands cupped around his ears, dramatically leaning as closely as he dared to the opening. Kaname was standing unflinchingly next to it, almost within sight of any who might be looking for intruders. He was probably hoping to get discovered.

I just sat on one of the low boxes, quietly inspecting my guns. Ideally someone would have something useful to report back to the Agano; otherwise I really would have to crash at Keisuke's place for the next little while. I was on the verge of being evicted from my apartment.

"This is gonna work!" someone from the group we were observing

exclaimed. "We can finally fight back with Mr. Fairbairn's information!"

I perked up and looked to Akira and Kaname, finding them intently listening at the narrow space between the two crates.

Akira ducked away suddenly, unsuccessfully pulling Kaname with him. Kaname dropped to his knees, still unable to tear his eyes from whatever he could see from there.

"Fairbairn-sama?"

Everything was silent for a long second. I guessed we had finally found the source of the rebelling demons. It was kind of hard to believe that the instigator was a foreign demon or even a human though.

Out of my peripheral vision I noticed a white form winding around a box. Reflexively, I shot at it; realizing after the gunshot finished echoing that it was a really bad idea.

Akira acted quickly, grabbing Kaname's frozen body and charging towards the nearest exit with Kaname slung over his shoulder. He didn't even bother to look back and see if I was following.

I turned to do just that, noticing the white thing I had shot was a snake demon, now returning to its human form. He was bleeding profusely from his lower stomach and I kind of felt bad since he was barely more than a teenager.

Without slowing down I picked him up, carrying him under one arm. He'd probably be useful to the Agano, especially if he didn't mind talking.

When I caught up with Akira, Kaname had snapped out of his trance and was running on his own two feet; away from the fight. He was spooked pretty good if he was retreating without having to be dragged with his heels digging into the ground. I was glad Akira was cautious like my little brother, like his father Shiranui Junta, otherwise both of them might have had to be pulled away like potato sacks.

Gun shots sounded behind us and bullets whizzed past on either side. It'd been a surprisingly long time since I was shot at this seriously.

I wasn't all that surprised though when one of was hit. Akira took one to the back of his leg and hit the ground hard. I was about to drop our hostage when Kaname doubled back lightning quick and flung Akira over his shoulder, quickly passing me again.

It was kind of daunting. I had worked with Kaname for quite a few years already and I had never seen him run like this before. I was really curious about what he had seen now.

I was getting to be out of breath and my knee was beginning to throb from the extra weight of the young snake demon but we somehow managed to stay out of an easy shooting range.

Kaname didn't seem to have a clue where he was running so I struggled to push ahead of him, leading him down a rather open street and then

over a few fences.

Our pursuers realized that they were following us into denser populated areas and gave up, begrudgingly. There'd be cops coming to investigate the gun shots soon as well.

We collapsed in front of a familiar shrine, panting hard. "I haven't run that hard in ages," I complained, massaging my knee. The snake demon seemed to be unconscious so I didn't really mind letting him lie on the hard steps.

Kaname struggled to get his breathing under control while he gingerly let Akira down. Akira looked a little pasty as he inspected his wounded leg. From where I sat it looked like the bullet hadn't gone through. It'd probably struck the bone or something.

"Is it broken?" Oni might have recovered from flesh wounds quickly but bones took much longer to heal, sometimes even as long as a human.

"Yeah,"

"Bummer,"

Kaname rolled his eyes, still taking deep breaths as he pulled out his cell phone. He was loathing admitting that he was out of shape. "I haven't had to pseudo teleport in at least . . . ever. That was my first time in the last five years,"

I couldn't remember the last time I had so I couldn't brag or anything.

Akira startled when he noticed someone on the steps behind him. "What the?! Who the hell are you?"

"Ookawa Yuuya," I replied for her.

She chuckled. At least she wasn't wearing pajamas this time. "Are you making it a habit of showing up on the shrine steps, covered in blood and riddled with wounds?"

Akira huffed defensively. He really should have tried to understand people, women in particular, better. She was just concerned.

Kaname dialed up his superior, probably his father. He was already acquainted with Ookawa Yuuya since her father was an Elder of the High Council and didn't let her presence bother him.

While he requested someone to come pick up the snake demon boy Yuuya offered Akira some gauze, which he begrudgingly accepted.

After Kaname put his cell phone away I cleared my throat. "Kaname, can you take Akira to Keisuke's place? It's nearby,"

He nodded. "What about you?"

"I'm resting my knee for a bit,"

He didn't question it any further and helped Akira up, disappearing in the blink of an eye.

"Did you hurt your knee, Shiranui-\_dono\_?"

I snorted. "Drop that shit title,"

She grinned crookedly, unfeminine like, correcting herself.  
"Shiranui-san,"

"It's an old wound, don't worry about it."

"An old wound?"

I pulled the leg of my sweatpants up around my knee. There wasn't a scar or anything; that had healed long ago. "Come here,"

She sat next to me on the steps, reaching her hand out to my knee. She drew back hesitantly and I captured her bony wrist, pressing her palm against my dysfunctional knee.

"Oh," it wasn't all that noticeable if you just looked. It was the random bumps on the bone and strangely fitting kneecap. "Does it hurt?"

I laughed. "A little,"

She shook her head. "How manly, showing me your old battle wounds . . . how did it happen?"

"Well, the battlefield was actually Kazama Chikage's yard. His oldest brother was absolutely terrified of bugs and I thought it'd be funny to find some tree dwelling crawler to stick down the back of his collar when he wasn't paying attention.

"There weren't actually that many bugs up there and I was climbing down when I saw Kazama's old ma coming from afar." I still remembered my stomach dropping at the sight of her. "Back then that old crow scared the heck out of all of us. I thought I would have taken a sprained ankle over a scolding from her any day and jumped."

She quirked an eyebrow at me, looking disappointed. "You hurt your knee landing badly from a tree?"

"Are you crazy?" I rebuked. "I wouldn't have broken a bone from falling out of that tree! When I jumped my leg got caught between two branches and I made it worse by struggling. I must have hung there for at least ten minutes before anyone even noticed me,"

Her curiosity was rekindled again and she shimmied closer. "Who saw you first?"

"Chikage did. That bastard just smirked and walked off!"

She giggled. "So how did you get down?"

I frowned. "It wasn't very graceful. His ma saw me dangling while pinning laundry up and ran to get Old Kazama. Despite her protests he just chopped one of the tree limbs off and let me drop on my head, practically."

"Oh. It must have been pretty awful,"

I shrugged. "What pisses me off the most is Chikage's never once apologized for just leaving me there. I suppose he did give me my first gun on the grounds that I should shoot his oldest brother, Chiaki, if he bugged me about not being able to run."

Someone called from the top of the steps and she patted my knee before standing. "Did you ever shoot him?"

"I shot at him, but I didn't hit him,"

"Oh? What a shame,"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I dialed Ren's cell number, something that very few were privy to. He'd actually given me his number before I even had a phone of my own and now this was my first time calling him.<p>

It was kind of sad that I was calling him for help, but I suppose that's what phones were for. I was really glad my part time job (it was hardly a part time job, what with its crazy hours) paid so well. I could have practically anything I wanted as long as I used Mom's allowance for food and other small expenses.

"\_Hello?\_" Ren answered after what had felt like a short eternity.

"Hi, I was just wondering if you could come pick me up,"

"\_Where are you? You sound nervous,\_"

I briefly explained that I was in a park bathroom near the shopping district. I hadn't looked at the name of the park when I entered and had no idea how to bring up the map system on my phone.

"\_Alright, I think I know which park you're talking about. I'll call you when I get there,\_" he hung up before I could reply really. I wanted him to come into the park and get me.

This situation wouldn't have existed if I had just taken my motorcycle to work. It'd been a nice day though and I had decided walking would be fine, especially since I was in the area before hand.

It was too bad I didn't own my bicycle. I could have ridden home if that was the case. Unfortunately the company owned the bike and I wasn't entitled to borrowing it to ride home on.

Walking really hadn't seemed like such a bad idea until I had to walk home, in the dark. I hated the dark.

It's not like I slept with a light on or anything; I just hated to walk around in it.

Take today for instance. I was maybe a block away from work when I

noticed someone was following me, albeit, clumsily.

I tried to reason to myself that he was probably, unmistakably, drunk but it just wouldn't work. Sure, I could have just jogged away but my knees were shaking so badly that I thought I'd just fall over.

Which brought me to why I was in a park bathroom.

It had seemed like a pretty good idea when I entered the park. I thought I could lose him if I turned some corners but he kept up pretty well for a portly, middle aged, man. Now I was stuck in the women's bathroom, too afraid to leave.

My cell buzzed in my pocket and I nearly backed into the toilet behind me. I hurriedly answered. "Ren?"

"\_Yeah, I'm in the parking lot out front now. Where are you?\_" He sounded impatient and I made an indignant sound that I hoped conveyed my hurt over the phone.

"I'm in the women's bathroom,"

"\_Still?\_"

"Well, I'm kind of hiding. Can you come and get me?"

"\_Could it be? You have a stalker, don't you?\_" He was really laughing and I quietly boiled. Sure, laugh at your girlfriend's misfortune.

"I'm pretty sure he's just drunk or something,"

"\_Don't you have pepper spray?\_"

I nibbled my lip. "I left it at home . . ."

He snickered. I was going to punch him when I got out of here.

"\_Aren't you athletic? Weren't you in karate?\_"

"What if he has a gun or something?" Hypothetically.

"\_I thought he was just a drunk?\_"

I didn't reply and just backed up against the locked door. I wanted to go home already.

"\_Alright, alright . . . I'll come 'escort' you out of the bathroom dungeon,\_"

He hung up and I was kind of surprised that he hadn't even asked what I was doing there in the first place. Well, he probably already thought that I was pretty stupid for getting cornered in a park of all places.

I hadn't told Ren exactly about my job yet and I'd try and keep it that way for as long as I could. My job as a bicycle courier was just a little more complicated than that and I didn't want my Mother Hen to worry his pretty little head off. He would probably chew mine off instead.

A few minutes later I heard a crunch in the gravel outside and panicked a bit. I really, really, didn't want it to be the drunk from earlier.

There was a knock on the door and I jumped. My throat had gone dry and I fumbled for something to say.

"Maria?" Ren asked.

I ripped the door open and practically jumped into his arms. I kind of just hung off of him like a koala.

He awkwardly but willingly hugged me back, rubbing between my shoulder blades comfortingly. After I loosened my grip he helped me get my feet back on the ground but was content enough to let me lean into him.

I felt a little guilty. He was actually putting an honest effort into our relationship. Me . . . I just kind of went with things, when I could. Between class, assignments, and work I didn't really get much time to spend with Ren.

"Why didn't you go on your bike?"

"The weather was really nice,"

The guilt was mounting still. The weather had been nice but that was always the perfect time to ride my bike. I didn't take my baby today because I was worried that people connected to a certain package I had delivered while on it would notice me.

He suddenly blew a breath past my ear and I jolted out of thought.

"You're such a baby," he teased, half smiling in the muted light from a lamppost some ways away.

"I don't like the dark," I grumbled and then sulked some. My nerves could have handled just the dark but not the dark and someone following me.

He kissed the crown of my head and apologized. He noticed that I was only wearing a T-shirt and rubbed my arms for me. I had gooseflesh and his warm hands on my cold arms weren't making it any better. I liked it too much to tell him the difference though. He wasn't wearing a coat or a sweater or even a long sleeved shirt either.

"Let's go,"

I almost wished that we could stay a moment longer. We didn't get very many together-and-alone moments like this. Toshio had a knack for interrupting us at the most inopportune moments.

Ren pulled me closer to his side, softly cupping my shoulder with his wide palm and slender fingers that spoke of someone who wasn't a stranger to the arts. I wouldn't be terribly shocked if he could play the piano.

"Are you doing anything tomorrow?" he inquired vaguely.

"Nope. I actually finished my art work before the deadline so I'm free for the whole weekend!"

"What about work?" he sounded suspiciously hopeful.

"I'm not scheduled this weekend but they never promise not to call me in," I nudged into him. "The last job looked like it might have been the last unscheduled project for at least a couple days,"

We reached the car and he turned to face me, red hot gaze burning a blush on my cheeks. He stooped to my height, capturing my lips. Whatever thoughts we had about making plans for the weekend were put on hold.

I stretched onto my tip toes to gain some ground on him, refusing to be the passive one. I didn't exactly mean it to be an aggressive kiss or anything; I just didn't like to feel like I wasn't putting any effort into it.

Ren's grip on my shoulder was almost painful but I disregarded it all together, appreciating the warmth of his other arm around my waist instead. I was riding a sort of high, enjoying the hum in my ears and the feel of his thrumming heart through his chest where my hand rested.

Without breaking the kiss he backed up, supporting his weight on the car. I felt the tickle of an exhaled breath and reluctantly broke the kiss, playfully nipping his lower lip before creating enough space between us to comfortably look at his bright, ruby, irises.

He chuckled, wearing one of his rare true smiles. He had sarcastic smiles and condescending smiles but neither was anything like the one he wore now. For now it was my smile and I'd really hate to lose it.

"Don't you breathe?" he joked.

I giggled. "Maybe,"

He pinched my nose and I swatted his hand away, skipping to the passenger side. Ren had seemed like such a stiff board at first but seeing him behave jestingly was second nature now.

A second, hidden, nature for me and for me alone.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>I was cutting it a bit close with this one XD;; went back to school on the third and didn't realize that half my courses were messed up so I've been trying to sort that out. First homework of the year was self inflicted as well; I typed up my world history and chemistry notes. <strong>

11. Make it personal

\*\*Please review everyone!\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the quick review, as always, Hikiri! I'm glad you really

seem to like Ren and Maria. I've looked through most of the fan fictions in the Hakuouki section and this seems to be the first one as a continuation of the previous generations of Oni. Regarding the drunkard . . . shh!\*\*

\*\*Lol, the dictionary recognizes smoosh and smush but word 2007 doesn't XD\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower</p>

Chapter 11: Make it personal.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Shiranui's POV</strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I really had been right on the money, in my own way. I had been thinking for quite some time that the street demons were acting too confident for their own power.</p>

It made a lot more sense now that we could add in another factor, an outside one. Kind of like those mysteries where there are supposedly only so many people and one has to be the murderer, but then at the end you realize that there's always been an extra player.

Knowing that we were looking for someone extra wasn't exactly much help though. I hadn't seen him and Kaname had yet to write his report on what he had seen. He hadn't even told me after we escaped; like he was afraid telling would make him even more of a target.

Since I couldn't get answers from Kaname at the moment I decided to pay Amagiri a visit. He knew a fair amount about most things. Foreign demons were probably amongst his vast knowledge.

I sat in a stiff chair in his office, across from a cluttered desk, slurping lukewarm coffee. Amagiri was apparently busier than I gave him credit for; another half hour passed before his looming self showed up in the door way.

"I'm sorry for keeping you so long, Shiranui."

"Whatever,"

He sat behind his desk, folding his hands in his lap after tidying up loose pens and papers. "What's this about?"

"You've heard that the Agano are all in a tizzy, right? I've come to ask about foreign demons that might be responsible."

Amagiri nodded. "I'm surprised. I did not realize you took your job so seriously,"

I scoffed. "What kind of Western demon would be over here helping out the weak ones?"

He stroked his chin, probably a habit that had stuck from his time

with a beard . . . thirty years ago now. His face still seemed empty to me without it. It used to make up for the fact that he had no eyebrows.

"There are many species of Western demons, maybe more than there are Eastern demons. The biggest difference between us would probably be our solidness. Some Western demons are little more than smoke, literally.

"While we have demons that are able to freely change between usually one specific form, whether animal or otherwise, they have demons that can take on many forms or none at all. Such demons that cannot alter their natural forms are unable to live in present day society at all. I do not believe that the demon you are looking for is one that is unable to.

"They have parasitic demons, like vampires, that must feed off humans to survive and demons that have very little control over themselves, like werewolves. There are demons that can physically become any other creatures and some that just trick humans and other demons into seeing them as something else entirely.

"Many of them depend on ancient magic unique to their own family or class. They impose strict clan systems to keep that magic safe, stricter than any clan here in Japan would."

That was all very interesting, but I was pretty sure he had misunderstood me or something. I stopped him before he could go on with a quick interjection. "What about Western demons that are currently in Japan? Are you in the know about them? Can you think of any that have just been wandering about here, apparently aimlessly?"

He rubbed his chin again, bald brows screwed together. "Unless they're here to actually meet with the Agano they generally keep to themselves and avoid trouble. We Easterners have quite a reputation, even amongst demons."

\* \* \*

><p>I was with Kaname again, 'patrolling' the streets. We were just wasting precious daylight as far as I could tell. I doubted we would actually run into anyone suspicious in the middle of the day.</p>

Maria had passed us on bike earlier, calling out a greeting, along with some poor sap in spandex bike shorts. The confused expression Kaname turned on me was kind of funny.

"Who was that?" he questioned.

"Ren's girlfriend," at least, that's what I had heard from Kazama a few weeks ago. My jaw had almost hit the floor at his casual acceptance at the time but recently I had been thinking any girlfriend (Oni or human) was better than no girlfriend.

"Ren-nii's? What is she?"

"A human," I was tempted to remind him Ren had already dated every Oni in his general age group.

Kaname ran a hand through his short black hair, not caring that it now stuck up in every direction. He took most things without blinking an eye but I could tell he wasn't quite sure what to think about that. He couldn't comprehend how a relationship between an Oni and a human could ever work out.

In fact, Kaname didn't really have much of an imagination. I respected his abilities as an Oni, and even his decisiveness, but using his brain for anything more than the obvious wasn't exactly his forte.

"So, who or what are we looking for right now?"

He frowned, the only sign of his discomfort.

"A foreigner with scarlet hair. At the time his eyes were black instead of white, though I don't know if they always appear that."

Ironically a group of girls with outrageous hair colors waltzed past us, giggling and flipping their hair. One even had apple red hair.

"Gee, Kaname, it's not every day you see someone with red hair."

He fixed me with a frigid stare but I was too amused to really be affected.

"I'm assuming he was a very old and powerful; maybe a gorgon or a basilisk. When he caught my eyes it seemed like every muscle in my body seized up and not even a breath could be drawn. It was akin to a great serpent coiling around my chest and squeezing the life from me,"

I wouldn't be the first to say his articulation wasn't the best. I got the idea though and suppressed a shiver. I hated snakes.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Being a bicycle courier was pretty fun, even though it made me admit my athleticism. I wouldn't have been able to get the job at all if I hadn't been able to make the various time trials around the city on bike.<p>

I wouldn't have been satisfied with just ferrying packages and information around though. The sect of the regular bicycle couriering company I was a part of wasn't so regular.

Here in the big city there actually were freelance detectives, something that was actually kind of unusual in London. At least, I had never noticed them while I lived outside of London.

I worked for one such freelance detective. I hadn't met him but from what I heard he was very well connected with both the police and the underside of the city. I was told he had personally selected my

partner as well.

Tsubaki Takamaru was rather tall and exotic looking with his naturally red auburn hair. His honey brown eyes even put me in mind of Ayame-san, in certain lighting.

Honestly, he made me a little uncomfortable at first. Takamaru seemed like a bit of a flirt but after spending all of my breaks talking to him I began to realize it was just his way of socializing. He didn't do it to make anyone uncomfortable or jealous so I flirted back a little.

Besides, I had Ren and he was only interested in a junior at his university.

He was really smart too! I couldn't understand what he was doing at such a risky job. It'd taken a while to really get a feel for his answer as well. He'd said at first he was doing it because it was exciting.

When I had gotten to know him better he'd vaguely explained that he felt like his life should have some greater purpose. Fighting crime through this job in whatever way available was the only way to really sate that feeling of his, or something.

Aloud, I had wondered why he didn't just become a police officer and he'd chuckled. He shared with me that he had a bit of a record from his younger days. Since he couldn't do that he was breaking his back going through law school. He often complained but just as often had something interesting to pass on to me.

We were taking a break outside of a park at that moment, resting under the shade of a couple trees while sipping water. We'd been delivering documents and other small things most of the day.

It was pretty hard in the growing temperatures and I again thought of summer vacation. I had about two weeks freed up from both art school and my part time job. I couldn't wait to go to my chalet in Hokkaido. Ren would probably come as well, though I hadn't properly asked him yet.

I was thinking up scenarios of asking him when my phone vibrated. Takamaru's did as well and I sighed. It must have been something important.

"Extreme caution in approach," he remarked, reading through the details. It was a pick up. "It's down by that new office building. If we go now we can get there between the time the construction workers go on dinner break and get back. The front and back roads aren't paved but there is a one way alley that opens into it. We can make a quicker get away if we have to that way,"

I returned my water bottle to my back pack and stepped on one pedal, waiting for Takamaru to take the lead. It was easier to just keep up with him than to argue about the route we'd take.

There was this nagging feeling that I got from Takamaru sometimes. He was definitely a flirt but sometimes he was so chivalrous and proper that I had to stop and ask him if he was being serious.

Of course, he was. Takamaru could be teasing to some extent but he didn't seem to be able to tell jokes. His absurd ideals were just part of his personality and I could appreciate that. I didn't exactly know many guys who were rightfully delicate about the way they said things.

Well, Ren wasn't careful about his words in the same way but he did mind the way he treated me. In his case it was more like he was afraid of physically hurting me. He didn't look that strong but he could send me sprawling just by nudging me.

Takamaru signaled for us to take a sharp turn down an alley and I quickly followed, refocused on the task at hand. Most days our rounds were uneventful but I wouldn't forget that we were sometimes a target, depending on who knew what we were really delivering.

When we arrived there was a short, puggy, sort of man. He was hiding his uncertainty horribly as he passed the thick envelope to Takamaru, who took it without a word.

The package didn't need to be signed off or anything so we immediately turned around, making to return ASAP to our office. The man was already hurrying off in the other direction as well, hunching.

We set down the alleyway we had just come from, making the first turn when a couple thuggish looking men stepped out at the other end. They didn't actually look like they had business with us so Takamaru carried on as per usual, skirting them by a couple of feet.

My stomach was up in my throat as he drew closer.

I ripped on my brakes almost before the bald man closest to Takamaru suddenly sprang at him, knocking him off his bike. I was off the bicycle and charging towards them, picking up an empty aluminum garbage can on the way, without even caring that the company's expensive piece of equipment was skidding across the pavement behind me.

The one closest to me was more lean than bulky and had angled himself at me, fingers curled around a crowbar. I spun, smashing the aluminum garbage can against him with a resounding crunch of metal.

He landed on his back, out cold.

Takamaru had wrestled the other one off of him and seemed to be punching his lights out on the ground. He had a busted lip but his opponent was probably going to look like a panda for a long time after this.

The poor guy wasn't fighting back anymore; he was just kind of trying to recoil away from Takamaru's fists. Takamaru noticed and got off of him, mounting his bike as fast as he could. I retrieved mine and pedaled after him in the same manner.

Just another small bump in my work day.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I laid on my side (half propped up with my elbow) browsing the internet on Maria's laptop. She'd brought it over earlier so she could do the same while I worked on a project. Now that I was finished she'd given it to me.</p>

I was more interested in what she was doodling on the bottom of my table. She'd been underneath it for a good hour now, scratching away on the wooden belly with an assortment of pens and pencils.

She hadn't said anything in almost as long and I was getting bored with the laptop. I sighed and got onto my hands and knees, crawling under the small table to study her handy work.

It was pretty elaborate, especially considering the time she'd been working on it. There were pine and spruce trees all along the border with wild flowers and grass bending with an invisible wind. The vocal point seemed to be the river cutting through it and the bear fishing for his lunch.

"This isn't your first day working on it, is it?"

Her eyebrows smoothed out a little and she put her pencil down. It was pathetically easy to break her attention.

"It's been a couple days now,"

I rolled my eyes. "Did you climb through the vents?"

"No, I picked the lock."

"Great." Nothing she said really surprised me anymore. I just accepted it as it was.

Maria rolled out and I banged my head on the table wiggling out after her. She laughed and raked her nails lightly down my side, trying to make me squirm and knock into the table again.

She attempted to scramble away before I could retaliate but wasn't nearly fast enough. I captured her, smushing her back to my chest. Her bony shoulder blades were kind of driving into my ribs but being able to nuzzle the crook of her neck made up for it. She was ridiculously ticklish there.

It wasn't hard to coax giggles from her until she was breathless. At the same time, I was intoxicated by her scent. Maria was fond of spicy aromas and they seemed to cling to her hair and skin. Presently she smelt of cinnamon and something sweeter, cocoa maybe.

I breathed a contented breath. No one had ever had this sort of effect of me before now. I could sincerely sit in her company without protest for hours.

I held back a second sigh, not wanting to ruin the mood. Some Oni just weren't destined to happily marry someone of like life. I must have been one of those poor souls. Sadder still, I'd happily oblige her every wish.

Maria managed to wiggle out of my distracted grip and was wrapping her arms sneakily around my midsection, succeeding in creating a rippling shiver. She rested her ear over my heart then, absently drawing circles on my chest.

"You do that a lot," I mumbled.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm the only person in this world that really thinks and breathes and has a heart that beats. Just reassuring myself that I'm not the only one,"

There was a guilty lump in my throat. I didn't quite think or breathe or even have a beating heart in the same sense as a regular person. I detangled that thought from my brain with a snort.

"Don't be stupid,"

Maria was perfectly aware that I rarely meant what I said when it was outright mean. Instead she raised her head from my chest, staring soulfully into my eyes. She pressed her lips to mine.

She had me wrapped around her little finger. I could say with fair certainty that she was capitalizing on the knowledge that she drove me crazy every time she nipped my lip coyly.

It was peculiar. I'd thought for sure, at first, that she must have been more experienced with relationships (of the twenty-first century variety) than I was. According to her though, the last time she'd kissed anyone else had also been her first and it hadn't even been a proper one. She'd been dared and she never stepped down from a dare, apparently.

Queerer still: despite her lack of expertise on the subject of dating, relationships, and other intimacies she seemed to be naturally (and unintentionally at times) gifted in the art of allurement.

Toshio didn't approve of our relationship at all though and had been dropping sexual themed jokes casually for a couple weeks now; probably trying to discourage both of us by making the atmosphere awkward. We'd discussed it on our own time though and had taken to rolling our eyes at Toshio's childish behavior. We were both content to just roll with the moment.

All the same, it was getting harder not to think about it, especially when she could kiss me until every inch of my body tingled. I hoped I wasn't the only one that suffered from light headedness.

It started at the very top of my head, vibrating through my skull until the only things I could hear through the blood rushing in my ears were her deep gulps of air between long and short kisses and the shallow gasps when the tips of my buzzing fingers grazed the sensitive skin of her sinewy hip and slender waist.

I was so preoccupied with the feel of her skin and the warmth spreading through me that I hadn't even realized I'd been pushed flat on my back, my shirt mysteriously missing. She was two parts seduction, one part hypnotic. I admitted I didn't really need to be coerced or anything; I was perfectly willing.

That irritated me enough to rumble quietly. Maria pulled back slightly, laughing at me as I drew her back. I was only half aware that my hands were pushing her shirt further up. Her flushed skin was softer than anything I'd ever felt. It seemed to be just as pleasing to her as she sank into my arms.

I jumped a little when I felt her bra strap, jerking my hands back to her waist unsurely. I was on the fence, trying to decide whether I should fix her shirt or just tear it off; either way, I wasn't just going to be able to resume caressing her back.

Maria had half frozen, the muscles in her back pulling taut. She sighed through the kiss and drew her knees in to straddle my sides tighter.

"Just take it off," she murmured provocatively against my temple.

I didn't have to be told twice.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Please review, everyone! No rating change or anything, anything, so be chill and try not to get disappointed if you're more perverted than I am.<strong>

## 12. Mother Hen

\*\*Please review, everyone! \*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review, Arcee-chan! Sorry about not updating on time but I've spent the entire week either in bed or curled up on a couch.\*\*

\*\*Hikiri! I'm sorry T.T I've tried it all but I still can't stop sneezing. I've had a couple nosebleeds. \*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower<p>

Chapter 12: Mother Hen.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I still didn't get why Toshio had been acting so bratty to Ren and me. Whatever though; he'd pulled that stick out of his ass and had been keeping his sulking to a minimum recently. The three of us were almost back to normal, minus the occasional deep sigh from Toshio.<p>

It made me wonder if he really did like me or something, but I had this feeling that it was a lot more complicated than that. Either way, we were hanging out again.

I was still a little ticked but I would get over it with a little

more time. I didn't like to just kick up a fuss when something bothered me, especially when I knew I didn't fully understand the situation.

I suspected Ren had taken him aside and talked to him to smooth over whatever Toshio's real problem was. I kept waiting for him to explain but it didn't look like I was ever going to get the answer at this point.

Still, I had been kind of hurt at first, since I already considered Toshio a good friend and Ren a very trust worthy man. I had to let it go though. I couldn't just pry into the affairs of two grown men.

Toshio had probably been hurt in his own way. I knew he and Ren were cousins but closer than brothers and just had to accept that Toshio felt strongly opposed to our relationship.

I grumbled, half in English and half in Japanese, turning onto my side. Ren pulled me back to his chest, placing a kiss on the back of my head.

"What's wrong?"

It had been a few weeks since our relationship had become a lot more personal and most nights I just broke into Ren's room and crawled into bed next to him after work. Either that or I was just too lazy to leave after spending most of the day with him anyways.

"Nothing's wrong," well, maybe. I was starting to worry that we had jumped into this relationship too quickly. Not even three months had passed since we first met, though I felt like we'd already known each other for years. It was a deceptive kind of belief. I honestly didn't know much about Ren.

I tried to answer his questions honestly and it seemed like Ren was able to dodge most the ones I directed at him. I comforted myself with the reminder that lots of young people were in similar relationships. Heck, at least we didn't lie to each other. We might have left some things unsaid but it was a hell of a lot better than outright lying.

Ren leaned on his elbow, gazing down at me with his strange red eyes. It was hard to stay depressed when he seemed so contented just looking at me.

"Good morning," I greeted dumbly.

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Good morning," and he bent down, pressing a feather light kiss to my lips. "When did you break in last night?"

"Three-ish,"

"Go back to sleep then. You don't have class until ten, right?"

I nodded and curled into his chest. "What about you?"

"Eight o'clock,"

"What time is it now?"

"Quarter after six,"

I pulled the blanket over my head, muffling 'too bright' and an already stifled yawn. The stupid windows were one of the things I hated most about the dorm. I couldn't even find a nice set of blinds or curtains to fit them.

There were no private bathrooms either, just a few stalls and showers on the first floor with a common bath. I didn't have anything against public baths but sometimes it was a lot nicer to bathe without half a dozen other girls. Trying to get the bath with no one around was pretty much impossible.

"Ren?"

"Hm?"

"Let's go apartment hunting."

He rumbled and swatted down some of my bed hair. I usually went to sleep with it in a bun or ponytail but had given up recently since Ren liked to comb his fingers through it.

"Good apartments are hard to find and harder to pay for,"

"I'm not allowed to charge anymore money to my private account with the company and I need something to spend it on,"

"Are you trying to say you'll pay the rent?" he rolled onto his back and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. I crawled onto his chest and tried my best to pout without cracking up. His hair was sticking up everywhere. I thought he'd make a perfect crazy scientist.

"You can rent it in your name but I'll pay most," I didn't want it to seem like I was using him to rent an apartment. Mom would know if I rented one myself and then she'd obviously know that I had a lot more money than I should have. "I'll buy groceries too, as long as you cook."

He snorted. "What brought this on?"

I was surprised that he wasn't asking exactly how much money I had. He never really asked and seemed happy with the answer that my secret job paid me well.

When I didn't answer he rolled his eyes. "You just want a walk-in-closet and a bathroom, don't you?"

I chuckled and lid down again, my head resting on his shoulder. "What gave me away?"

"Women," he joked. "Are you sure? You might get bored with me if you have to put up with my grumbling every day,"

I bit his ear and he jumped. "I put up with your grumbling every day anyways,"

"Oi!"

He made to tickle me but I snuggled close to him, claiming I was tired and that I wanted to go back to sleep now. He begrudgingly eased off and I took advantage of his trust to pinch his backside.

"You're not going to get any sleep if you keep this up, you know?"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Shiranui's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Being Agano's lapdog meant I had to do a whole lot of things that I hated, a lot. It wasn't like I had any choice and they took advantage of that.<p>

Some things though, I didn't mind.

Take safe guarding Ookawa Yuuya while she went shopping, for example. I doubted she really needed to be watched in the middle of the day but it made her father feel better. He was a High Elder; one who was most likely on the enemy's list for assassination.

I didn't really have time to think about more important matters though; Yuuya was demanding my opinion of every article of clothing she tried on.

"You know, sometimes I wish Oni had regular features. It's really hard to coordinate an outfit that doesn't clash with blue hair and orange eyes,"

I rolled my eyes. "Your features aren't that exaggerated. Most humans probably trick themselves into seeing your hair as black and your eyes as brown." Her hair pretty much was black, just with a hint of blue.

She twirled in front of a mirror, checking out the flounce of a frilly knee length skirt. "I really do appreciate the nationwide charm but that doesn't mean I'm not going to try and match my clothing with my eyes and hair color."

The Agano had made less keen humans unable to physically distinguish most demons from humans for the last hundred years. Mine and Amagiri's appearances were easier to see through while most humans just rationalized that Kazama and his family was half foreign.

I figured it was the blonde hair. Blonde hair seemed to be the classic embodiment of foreignness.

Essentially, demons had fallen off the map and into folk tales and children's bedtime stories.

"Shiranui-san, are you buying anything? It was nice of you to offer to come with me and carry my bags when my friends called to cancel but I'd feel bad if your thought this was a waste of your time."

I shrugged. "My budget's pretty tight at the moment," I couldn't exactly tell her that I was only there to watch over her. Her father

and mother didn't want her to think that she was in any danger at all.

Conveniently I knew her well enough accompany her to the mall without seeming too suspicious; a fact that her father detested. When Kaname nominated me for the job the High Elder hadn't even been aware of my presence in his daughter's life.

Kaname didn't normally defend me (unless he thought that I was honestly in a dangerous situation) but he did so then. He had to spend at least twenty minutes convincing Elder Ookawa that I hadn't met with Yuuya alone.

Thanks to that I was enjoying a semi relaxing day. Yuuya might have been pretty lippy but that didn't really factor in when she was too busy comparing clothes.

I checked my phone for the time and my stomach growled even louder. I had skipped breakfast, assuming we'd eat somewhere for dinner.

"Want to get something to eat?"

She only half heard me. "Um-hmm, in a minute,"

I sat heavily on the bench, glad they'd thought about the poor saps that had to wait for friends and girlfriends to finish trying on clothes. When she appeared again, in a summery dress, she sized me up.

"Is your knee hurting from standing for so long?"

"It only bothers me when I actually exert myself,"

"Oh . . . well, I'm glad. I still want to visit a couple more stores," my lip twitched downwards and she flashed me a pert smile. "You're the one who volunteered to babysit me,"

"Actually, I was designated the least suspicious by Agano," I wouldn't say it was unexpected for Yuuya to figure out she was being watched. Her father was awfully blunt.

She seemed insulted. "You? Just a few weeks ago Kaname thought you might have had something to do with the death of an Elder,"

"Forgive me for having an unhealthy obsession with guns," I sneered back.

We both glared. I wasn't in an understanding mood, though I did rationalize that being watched by the Agano was just as bad as working for them.

"I'm not dumb you know. You could have just done me the favor of honestly asking to accompany me in these uncertain times,"

"Yeah, like your father would allow that."

"He allowed this, didn't he?"

Thanks to Kaname's and a couple others nagging him.

"Listen; just forget about the Agano and your father and the rest of the craziness," I doubted that was feasible but saying it might have had some value. "Just keep flaunting those long legs and I won't complain,"

She crossed her arms and glowered at me. I thought she might have been seriously offended but her eyes were definitely sparkling. "Are you flirting with me, Shiranui-san?"

"Maybe," and I would keep flirting too, as long as her old man didn't find out.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Finding an apartment was almost too easy, what with the help of Suzumu and Toshio. Someone on the third floor of their apartment had moved out suddenly and they managed to hold it for us. The landlady didn't even have to put it in the paper, which she was grateful for.<p>

The only down side to it was Maria was now living with three Oni in the very near vicinity. I was just tempting fate to have her find out. It didn't help that Suzumu was horrible at keeping secrets.

She and Suzumu had almost gotten off on the wrong foot to boot. It was probably Suzumu's perplexed frown when he saw her and his thoughtless quip.

"\_You're still dating that girl?"\_

I rubbed my eyes. It was kind of funny, if Maria hadn't looked ready to haul back and punch him.

"\_Excuse me?"\_

"\_I just assumed Ren wasn't really serious,"\_

"\_What is with your cousins?! What did you do to make them have so little faith in you?"\_

Suzumu would have told her too if Toshio hadn't dragged him away.

It was the weekend so I was hoping that we might be able to take our time while unpacking. We'd only just finished moving all of our belongings (most of which were art supplies) into the apartment. Then Maria got called by her work.

She paled, skittering to her shoes while texting furiously on her cell after ending the call.

"What's wrong?"

"Nobody can get a hold of Takamaru, my co-worker. I'm going out to help look,"

This was almost the first time she'd confided to me about her work

and I stood to follow her. "I'll help,"

She shook her head. "No, it's fine. I'm going on my motorcycle anyways,"

I growled, barely audible. Her secret job was really starting to piss me off. I didn't care if I was being a hypocrite, what with my own secrets. At least mine didn't have me out all hours of the night, coming back with scratches and bruises.

The small wounds used to be only every so often, now they were daily. I grit my teeth. "Be careful," I considered following after her on foot.

The appreciating smile and torn eyes were almost enough to make her forgive her then and there. She completely trusted me, despite the secrets on both sides. I felt like following her would betray that trust. Instead, I'd properly ask her about her job when she got back.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Anyways, please review! I might be a chapter behind but I still plan on having everything finished by December 14<strong>\*\*th\*\*\*\*! I know I promised two chapters for this Friday but I barely had this one finished and didn't want to completely botch the next chapter. I have two long weekends coming up though and hopefully I'll have time between studying for tests to catch up.\*\*

13. Worse than it looks

\*\*Please review!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower<p>

Chapter 13: Worse than it looks.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Wednesdays were probably my favorite day of the week; other than Saturday and Sunday, of course. Wednesdays meant I didn't have afternoon class.<p>

My boss somehow found out about that small detail. Now my Wednesday afternoons were spent cycling around the city just like the rest of my days off. Still, being free of art school was nice.

I ran into Ren on my way out. He still seemed to be brooding and I suspected it had all to do with me running out on him to help Takamaru.

Takamaru had been completely fine. He'd just run into some guy that

seemed to be a few cards short of a full deck. After that he ran into his underclassmen and forgot all about signing out. He'd thoroughly been scolded by our fellow employees and me when we finally located him

"Are you free for supper?"

I thought for sure he'd finally demand to know about my job but I guessed even Ren wasn't that indelicate.

Without missing a beat I snatched his hand and twisted his arm, forcing him to dance with me in the hallway. The few spectators skirted around us without even blinking.

"I have work right now but I'll be free for supper. What's up? Do you have something planned?"

"My brother and his wife invited us over,"

"I'll be there,"

"Do you need a ride?"

I shook my head, which might not have been apparent in part by the silly dance I was doing. He looked like he wanted to persist.

"I'll be fine,"

Ren exhaled through his nose, nostrils flaring almost negligibly. I understood Ren well enough to know that his verbal complaints were jokes compared to his subtle, silent, brooding.

I let go and skipped a few paces away. "Five o'clock?"

He nodded and turned down the left wing with a clipped wave. He'd definitely been itching to ask me about my job.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Oka-san's timing was really awful sometimes. I hadn't gotten the chance to ask Maria about her job and I was pretty sure she noticed too. If I kept running into distractions (like dinner at my parent's place) I would never get around to asking Maria the important questions.<p>

Supper was about ready and Oka-san was getting a little impatient with me.

"Call her,"

"She never answers her phone," only when it suited her.

Oka-san let her hair down from her ponytail, frowning at the window. "She could have at least called to let us know she would be late,"

"Maybe she's caught in traffic," Oyaji suggested.

"Traffic means squat to her," I reminded him.

Oka-san grudgingly turned off the oven. It was her first time cooking lasagna and she had demanded both Maria and me be there to taste her masterpiece.

"Maybe she's walking?" he ventured tentatively. He didn't want to upset his wife anymore than I did. She was a little bit dramatic sometimes.

I stretched my brain trying to recall whether or not she went to school on her bike. We had classes an hour apart most mornings so I normally went ahead in the Corolla. She always stored her bike in the underground garage.

"Maybe. She walks when the weather is nice,"

Oyaji rubbed his chin. "Walk down the street then. She may already be in the area,"

I shrugged. She might not have realized how long it took to walk from where ever her work place was in the city to the residential area.

"Keep supper warm,"

At the doorway I slipped on my shoes. Oka-san's brow was puckered; half annoyed, half worried. She still wasn't used to sitting at home doing nothing when she thought someone she knew was in some kind of trouble. She'd likely never kick the feeling of helplessness.

The door clicked behind me and I briskly crossed the yard, walking fast without looking anymore taxed than from a leisurely stroll. The neighborhood was on mute.

I punched Maria's number. An automated voice cut in immediately, stating that her phone was either out of the service area or turned off. Maria almost never answered her phone so I didn't let it bother me. Somewhere deep in my head there was a little whisper wearily reminding me that she had never not had her phone on before.

Both of us had been busy the past week. She might have forgotten to charge her phone.

Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was swallowing marbles. She was human; a thousand things could have gone wrong. Traffic could be heavy in the city and humans broke so easily.

A growing trail of water from an exhaust pipe caught my eye. I only half examined it from my peripheral vision for a few feet. The small drops were an indiscernibly dark shade until one particularly fat splatter.

It was nearly black at first glance, leaning more towards brown as the sun cooked it on the pavement. On second inspection it was unmistakably blood.

I popped down the road, forgetting to check for wandering eyes. The trail was heavier here; an occasional strip of tire treads visible. I followed it around a turn, weakly putting my foot down.

The crosswalk was smeared with blood. A barely visible silhouette of blood had survived as the blood filled out a small dip in the road.

"Maria?" I choked. I reached for my cell, instinctively dialing her number again. I hadn't heard any sirens and my parent's house was near enough to hear them if they'd been here.

"\_The customer you have dialed is out of the service area or has his/her phone turned off,\_"

Static seemed to be the only thing my ears could decipher for a few seconds. I numbly slipped my phone back into my pocket and willed my head to clear.

A rustle as loud as a plane taking off interrupted the buzz and I turned in a full circle, locating a springy branch of a hydrangea bush. No thrush sang or sprang into flight. I crossed the road, giving a wide berth to the blood.

The heart shaped leaves trembled near the base and I distinctly heard a rough dragging sound. I knelt on the grass, my hand brushing something sticky. I thought I might have squashed a bug before checking my hand, finding blood on it instead.

I slapped aside a handful of the thick leaves. The girl hiding in the hydrangea was at once familiar and completely foreign to me. Never had I imagined I would see the one I loved, or anyone, decorated in gore.

My mind emptied of current thoughts until my father's words were all that remained. Stories of his youth played through my mind.

He spoke of three specific times in his life often, always beginning with his tales as a soldier in a demon army. He had looked death in the face plainly at that time, neither thankful nor relieved that it passed him by and took the man next to him instead.

Like many Oni, he had seen himself as being above death and when it finally breathed down his neck he accepted it with a smile on his face. He regretted nothing if he could die by the hands of worthy opponent.

Death lost him to my mother and fell away from him time and time again. It realized that he was no longer afraid for his own life and the next time it visited his heart instead.

My mother was his heart and the one person who could push him into his grave. I'd found someone who could do the same to me. The sight of her broken and sullied summoned a flood of terror that washed my vision with crimson brush strokes.

Somehow, in her state, she had pushed herself from the road to the bush here. She hadn't even left a trail of blood as though her remaining hope was that she remain undiscovered.

I wanted to sweep her into my arms and take off to the nearest hospital. It appeared to me a miracle that she hadn't died already and I feared moving her would cause what was left to slip through my

fingers. Her collarbone protruded oddly.

She squinted one eye through a trail of blood running from a gash on her forehead. She opened her mouth but closed it again.

"Don't speak," I begged, gingerly laying my hand across her knuckles. They were less bloodied than her forearms.

Her eyelashes fluttered and she looked away, gaze distant. She sighed and her eyes slowly slid back to mine.

"Am I late for supper?"

I blinked. Was this all a dream? There was no way anyone, even someone as quirky as Maria, would have last words like that.

A car was coming and I figured that would clarify whether this was a dream or not. Maria shrank further back into the bush though and prompted me to do the same with a twitch of her limp shoulders.

Whoever it was slowed and almost came to a stop before continuing on. Either they thought it was an elaborate prank or had called the police or an ambulance and decided to avoid the situation all together.

She rubbed her face in the hydrangea leaves, assumingly to get rid of some of the blood. Her head had been split open a moment ago but only the blood remained now. My teeth were grit so tightly that I was beginning to develop a headache.

"Maria . . . what's going on?"

It was getting harder and harder to swallow and questioning the reality of the situation was just making me feel ill. I'd been keeping my own nature a secret from her and for what reason?

"Well, I got hit by a car."

Despite the situation I had to bite back a rather sarcastic remark. I was feeling just a bit faint.

"Oh? So where'd they go?" I challenged. I could play the I-don't-give-a-damn game though I did want to know where the person who'd done this to her drove off to. Amagiri could be persuaded to help me make someone disappear.

"You know, I'm thinking it was an intentional hit and run." She actually laughed at that, shortly. She was almost gagging on blood. "They ran me over again after I hit the ground,"

She really shouldn't have told me that. I sensed she was just as angry with her attackers as I was.

Her stomach was gouged open and blood still ran freely from it. How the hell had she gotten off the road without leaving a huge streak of some sort?

"Why the hell would someone hit you and then run you over again?!" whoever had done it was one sick bastard.

"I was couriering some apparently dangerous information,"

I dryly wondered if that would narrow my search down. It was probably someone from a gang or maybe even a hitman hired to keep the information quiet.

Another car passed, slowing down just as the other had. Maria seemed concerned, but not for herself.

I lightly touched her shoulder, not wanting to cause her any pain. She gave no indication of pain but I doubted that was the truth.

"We have to go,"

I had no problem carrying her (I would have carried her even if she had insisted on walking) but paused when I took in the deadness of her legs.

"You didn't . . . ?"

She chuckled again. "Yeah, they're not walking me anywhere for a while."

I took a steadyng breath and picked her up carefully. Just by holding her I could feel that her back was broken. It defied all of my understanding.

The next moment we were back on the doorstep. Maria's head lulled but she quickly held it up again. She tried not to look too disoriented.

Oka-san threw the door open before I could balance Maria with one arm and her eyes shot open. She immediately seemed to want to take Maria from me but stopped, unsure how to hold her without damaging her further.

"Sorry I'm late," Maria joked. She was doing a horrible job at lifting the mood.

Oka-san seemed to have worked out her own conclusion and guiltily met my eyes. She must have suspected something right from the start, knowing her. If not her, then the Beni-hime had noticed something off and hadn't kept her mouth shut.

Oyaji stuck his head out into the hallway. He was uneasy for a millisecond before accepting that we seemed to be okay.

"Don't just stand there!" Oka-san scolded. "Get inside and put her down!"

She scrabbled to put a futon down in one of the spare bedrooms and I followed after her. Maria was mumbling assurances that no one believed.

"I'm fine . . . and no one's listening."

I laid Maria onto a hastily kicked out futon and Oka-san punched me in the arm. Of course she blamed me. She even made me turn around when she addressed Maria's wounds.

"Ayame-san, really, you don't need to do anything. Honestly," Maria asserted.

Okasan squeaked indignantly. "Your intestines are this close to falling out!"

Maria giggled nervously. "It's not as bad as it looks, or could be."

"Aren't you in any pain?!"

Okasan was freaking out and my head was feeling heavy again.

"Not if I don't think about it,"

Her breathing was becoming a bit erratic, as though Okasan's panic was spreading to her.

"This whole scenario is pretty crazy . . ." Maria admitted, taking a deep gulp to fight her own hysteria. "But really, don't freak out. I'm pretty pretty sure that I am not going to die,"

"Why didn't you tell us you weren't human?" I demanded.

Maria didn't immediately respond and I glared over my shoulder. She looked straight up at the ceiling and tears crept to the corners of her eyes before overflowing and spilling down her temples.

"Even I tricked myself into believing I was human, thinking it would go away if I didn't think about it."

Okasan's voice cracked as she spoke. "But why didn't you tell us; we're?"

"Different? Yeah, I know." She sounded almost envious as she continued. "You guys know what you are and depend on each other. I, for one, haven't the slightest clue why I'm this way."

"You could have trusted us right from the start," Okasan maintained.

Maria closed her eyes to fight back the tears. "Maybe. Would you have believed me yesterday or a week ago or even a month ago? Do you believe me now when I say 'I'm immortal.'?"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Okay x.x I've been so slow but I'm finally finished with chapter thirteen. HISS! Unlucky number X.X<strong>

14. Broken in more way than one

\*\*Please review!\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review, Hikiri! I was having so much trouble with that chapter x.x\*\*

\*\*I seem to have fallen behind again T.T \*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower</p>

Chapter 14: Broken in more ways than one.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV</strong>

\* \* \*

><p><em>Do you believe me now when I say 'I'm immortal.'?</em>

Ren left right after I said that. The subtle downwards tilt of his lips looked so much more strained than usual. It hurt to know that he was fighting back a grimace.

Ayame seemed to want to say something to him but I shook my head. He was right to be angry at me. He had kept secrets as well but he had at least felt guilty for it. I just pretended not to notice his slip ups and my own as well.

At the very moment I was fighting with my body, willing my collarbone to stay at its odd angle. It drew tighter and tighter, like a taut bow waiting to be released. I didn't want Ayame to witness it snap back into place so I help my breath and lectured my body on its behavior.

Ayame was quiet, though she occasionally tried her voice. She wasn't sure how to proceed. She wasn't even sure if she should start by asking me about myself or explaining about herself and her family.

As the seconds ticked on I could feel my skin stretching and repairing itself, bones trying to slip back into place.

"Ayame-san, I'm fine, really. Why don't you put the kettle on and have some tea?" she could really use it too. She wasn't exactly relaxed at the moment.

She fidgeted, reluctantly standing. "I'll be right back. Should I put some on for you?"

"Sure,"

She pulled the door behind her, not quite shutting it. I let out a relieved breath and my body freed itself of the tension. I nearly blacked out as bones sank back into their sockets and rejoined broken pieces.

It didn't hurt; not really. I couldn't remember ever feeling pain the same way as others did. The feeling in my toes was beginning to come back. It was all together dizzying.

By the time Ayame returned with the tea I felt in control of my body again and sat up without her help.

She handed me my tea and cleared her throat. She was ready to sort

out the situation now, after collecting her thoughts.

"Say, Maria-chan, I've kind of thought for a while that you were a little different."

I took a gulp of the tea, not even pretending to find it hot. My mouth was still dry and there was nothing I could think to reassure myself. "I haven't really been hiding anything. It's just more comfortable to stick with what's familiar,"

"And being human is familiar to you?"

"Yes." Of course it was. Everyone else around me was human, except for Ren and his family. I had only properly noticed that I wasn't human a few years ago.

"I understand why you would hide it from people that you aren't completely familiar with . . . but what about your parents? Are they different, like you?"

I couldn't say that they weren't different. My mother was a pretty strange person and so was my father but I was sure that was just their lifestyle. "They're normal,"

Ayame took a contemplative sip of tea. "So you have no idea what you are? That can certainly be frightening,"

She didn't know the half of it.

"What about you guys? Judging by your reactions to my injuries it isn't something you're used to seeing." A few weeks ago I had almost worked up the courage to reveal my condition to Ren. He'd cut himself while chopping up vegetables for dinner and it had healed almost too soon for a drop of blood to even bead to the surface. Ren hadn't thought I noticed, obviously.

"We're called Oni," Ayame pronounced slowly. "Telling you is a bit of a daring move. There's quite a few of us in Japan right now and some pretty strict rules about revealing ourselves to outsiders,"

I let that run through my head. "So, you're demons?"

She shrugged. "That's what the legends say. Maybe now's a good time to correct our family tree as well. I'm actually Ren's mother,"

"I thought so," Ren looked an awful lot like Chikage, his father, but he definitely had his mother's nose. Her ears too.

"Will you forgive Ren for reacting like that?" Ayame's motherly concern suited her.

I was hurt, but I also understood his concern. Ren didn't like to lie or be lied to. I sighed. "There's nothing to forgive."

"Ren is just a bit confused. He struggled with accepting his feelings and it's like the rug has been pulled out from under his feet. We live very long and having relationships with humans can be difficult,"

"That's still a problem then. I know I'm next to impossible to kill

but I have no idea how long I might live. For all I know I might just be some human anomaly,"

Ayame touched her fingers to her lower lip, something she did when she was thinking. "Is there anything else you noticed about yourself? Maybe you are a demon. I've heard of cases where the entire family has been human except for one generation. Demon genetics work like that sometimes,"

It sounded better than speculating that I was adopted. "I don't know. I know I can't drown or suffocate, bleed to death, or even die from extreme trauma; like today."

"You've completely healed in less than a half our as well,"

"More or less. I don't really feel pain either, though panicking is probably just as bad. I'll feel weak for a few days afterwards as well,"

"I see . . . nothing else? Not even above average senses?"

I had to think about that for a moment. My eyes had been checked on one or two occasions and at the time the optometrist just reported that they were in working order. I wouldn't really know if I had a superior sense of hearing or smell; no one had ever remarked that I perceived things before they did.

"No." Ren had once complimented my light-footedness. "I suppose I'm more physically able than regular people though,"

"Do you mean that you are stronger than humans?"

"No. I'm definitely not like Ren. I just have way more endurance," I thought to say grace but Ren also brought that to a whole different level.

Restlessly, I pushed the blanket back. It was stained but most of my blood had turned dark and dried up, flaking off. Ayame looked at it curiously as well.

"I've never had blood work done before. It'd be interesting to see what the results would be," not like there was anyone certified that I could trust. "The blood on the road has probably already turned to dust and blown away,"

Ayame tested the chips between two fingers, grinding it into a fine powder. "When did you notice? I can't imagine you could keep it a secret from your parents at a young age,"

"Up until I was fourteen I just pushed all the little signs to the back of my mind." I had never needed a Band-Aid as a kid. All of my cuts and bruises disappeared before anyone could notice them in the first place. I scarcely noticed it was even happening. "I went on a skiing trip at my father's resort a few years ago and had an accident. I've known for sure since then. At the same time I realized I could also hold off  
>the process,"<p>

Ayame looked up from her teacup. "What do you mean?"

At the time I thought I was dead for sure. My head had been literally split open and there were bits and pieces of what I could only assume was my brain mixed with the snow and blood.

"I can make a conscious decision whether I want to begin healing or not." For a while I had played dead on the road, just to make sure no one came back to check on me right away. "Anything that separates from my body decays extremely quickly as well."

I could probably get away with any crime that way. Finger prints and strands of hair would just disappear.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I returned later that evening to give Maria a ride back to the apartment. I had almost expected that I would have to trundle her back there but she was already up and about, moving as though nothing had happened.<p>

She wasn't completely unaffected on closer inspection though. Dark circles had appeared under her eyes and her normally true green eyes had become dull disks riddled with hazel cracks. It relieved me.

My emotions seemed to take more turns than I did on the way through the city.

One moment I was just relieved that she was okay and resolved myself to apologize to her for running off in a tantrum. Her being an 'other' like my family and me brought another kind of relief, one that was short lived.

The anger just kept returning, coupled with a sharp embarrassment. I chastised myself for guilelessly trusting her and the twenty-first century standards of courtship. The betrayal was like tacks in my shoes; it stuck in no matter how lightly I stepped.

I believed in the kind of selfless love that meant laying everything bare for the other to see. The only thing that contradicted that was my own secret. I felt her knowing would box her in. It was a burden and I wouldn't put it past the Agano to use it to twist her under their weight.

As my concern mounted my anger melted and I felt like pulling over and hugging her tight. Words were beyond me and a methodical numbness kept me from stomping on the brakes.

I contemplated where to sleep and by the time I made up my mind I was already in the doorway of our apartment. Maria's shoes were off and she was gazing up at me with the kind of eyes that reminded me of mistreated animals and children scolded for something they hadn't thought was wrong.

I backed out of doorway and nodded curtly. "I'll be at Suzumu's,"  
\_not that you'll need me.\_

Suzumu wasn't exactly happy to see me. He was planning on staying up

all night correcting papers for his students and saw me as some sort of distraction. An unlit cigarette hung from his mouth. It didn't make his mood any better.

I wanted to ask him his advice but instead reassured him I would go straight to bed. I did, though I didn't sleep for a long time.

Over and over again I asked myself how I had managed to live with someone as innocent as Maria without noticing that something was off. Maybe it was because she was so innocent. I just assumed that what I saw was exactly what she was without looking deeper.

I thought it might not have even been that difficult to have asked her about it had I noticed sooner. It seemed now, at three o'clock in the morning, that she really hadn't buried it. She might have been waiting, hoping, all along that I would notice and bring it up. I had been waiting for the same thing.

Through that logic I agreed I was cowardly scum.

The night was long the short amount of sleep that I found did nothing to shorten it. The moment the sun began glaring through the windows I was up and out without even caring to thank Suzumu for his hospitality or even call out a stiff greeting.

I made my way up to mine and Maria's apartment and tested the door, finding it unlocked. Maria probably knew there was no point in trying to lock me out.

Quietly, I got a glass of water in the kitchen and drank it slowly. I pushed off from the counter, wandering from the kitchen to the living room and finally to our room. At first I thought she would have been stubbornly rolled up on the couch.

Instead she lay curled in a ball on her side of the bed. She hadn't crawled under the covers and had barely done more than change her clothes and shower, removing the last traces of being run over.

Lightly, I sat on the edge of the bed, guiding a wild curl away from her face. She looked exhausted and the bags under her eyes had darkened. It was strange, that this was my first time seeing her physically exhausted. She'd pulled all nighters and worked constantly during the time I knew her.

I should have noticed.

After that I got ready for school quickly. I figured I could get out without her being any wiser of my visit. I didn't yet know if our relationship could be reconciled but decided I would at least calm down before I spoke to her next.

I had watched for her during school but she always managed to be turning a corner away from me by the time I looked up from my feet. She was probably just as uncertain as I was and I allowed myself to escape to Toshio's after class ended.

For once Toshio didn't bombard me with questions or even I-told-you-so's. He was content with my vague explanation of Maria's unusualness and didn't berate me for running away. The only dig he

got in was the obvious "you're a hypocrite, and an idiot."

I stayed with him on Friday and Saturday before picking myself up to idle somewhere else. The mall seemed like the best place. Malls were one of the things I liked the most about the present era.

It was somehow relaxing to drift from store to store, judging items and prices, watching both the workers and the customers and the various interactions. People watching had become quite a habit of mine some years ago. It was what had brought my eyes on Maria in the first place and then all the times afterwards until she wasn't just another person.

She'd gone from a 'nobody' to a 'somebody' in record time. I was normally quite picky over who I let near me. It didn't help that she had pervaded my thoughts even as the foreign student who no one really knew anything about.

So preoccupied with my thoughts was I that I didn't even notice Shiranui had spotted me, let alone been in the vicinity. I didn't have time to conveniently disappear. Strangely, he had Ookawa Yuuya with him.

"I haven't seen you in ages. How's Maria?"

Shiranui wasn't exactly someone to trust with your personal problems. He was sometimes both idyllic and shockingly romantic and I wasn't about to try his advice. He might have looked and acted like a loose cannon but he was an old badger under all of that.

"She's fine,"

He didn't believe it for one second, not after my thoughtful pause. I had considered plainly saying we weren't seeing each other anymore.

"You don't sound fine," he scoffed. "You guys have a lover's quarrel?"

Yuuya openly looped her arm around Shiranui's, leaning against his side. He didn't pull away but cautiously threw his eyes about the mall. He wouldn't put it past her old man to have someone tail them.

"Shiranui-san," she teased. "Stop bothering Ren-dono. Let's go watch a movie,"

I couldn't be sure if she was just taking advantage of Shiranui or if she actually liked him. She was the kind of spoiled kid that just twisted everyone around her. She did look quite pleased.

It annoyed me that Shiranui was having better luck than I was. He was deserving of it, or maybe he just hadn't been searching hard enough until now.

I stood on the second level of the mall, looking out through the huge glass wall. The temporary open-air flower shop set up in front of the mall was teeming with customers. On the edge of the crowd was a familiar pair.

Maria and her partner gulped water from their canteens, admiring the flowers with pointed fingers and appreciative nods. What did Maria think of humans? Was she afraid to hurt them or did she even distinguish between them and herself?

She and her partner put away their refreshments and kicked off. I turned away, planning on heading back to the apartment for a bit.

A cloud passed over the sun and everything dimmed. Even the hum of people chatting and music mixing from the different stores situated down the mall faded away. It felt like a marble slid down my throat.

The red haired man from the soba-ya stood not even ten feet away, looking down at the same scene. The intentness of his stare sent goose bumps down my spine.

I pivoted on my heel and set off in the opposite direction.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>So yeah. Please review x.x I'm trying to get back on track.<strong>

## 15. Humpty Dumpty

\*\*Please review!\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review, The Queen of Water. I'll try not to keep you waiting for too long!\*\*

\*\*Hikiri! You impatient person XD I haven't gotten the extra chapter out, yet, but I'll definitely get it sometime between now and December 14\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\*, 2012! I've already decided that I'm finished with fan fictions once that date rolls around. Thus will end my one year excursion on writing freedom Q.Q\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review, Arcee-chan! I missed you T.T she's a little more than just immortal. I'm actually a little annoyed with the plot since I discovered a lot of pointless and trivial information so I'm considering cutting the part with Mr. Mystery-Dude out. Depends on how it works, I guess.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower<p>

Chapter 15: Humpty Dumpty

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>In the end, I didn't go back to the apartment. I went to Toshio's again but left shortly after. There was nothing to eat at his place and I wasn't in the mood to eat at a maid cafÃ©.<p>

Oka-san was a reliable cook so I headed over there, driving slowly over the spot where Maria had been struck. Nothing remained but the image in my head. It was really amazing that the authorities hadn't come.

The door slung open the moment I pulled into the driveway, Oka-san's head poking out through. She scanned the car, lips pursed. She was clearly disappointed that Maria wasn't with me.

"There's nothing to eat at Toshio's," was my only explanation.

She almost slammed the door on me. "You mean to tell me you've left Maria-chan alone in the apartment?! For how long?!"

She did slam the door behind me and I swore I could hear Oyaji chuckling lightly from the kitchen. At least there was something baking in the oven.

"I don't have anything to say to her,"

"You stubborn ass!" she screeched, thumping the heel of her hand on my shoulder. "You could have at least stayed there. Maybe you would have thought of something to say to her or Maria-chan would have!"

She stalked after me to the kitchen and crossed her arms when I sat at the table.

"Neither one of us wants to see the other right now,"

Oka-san angrily turned her back on me and Oyaji shook his head. She opened the oven door, pulling out a casserole dish. They hadn't really meddled with my relationships before now. Circumstances, I suppose.

"Speak for yourself," she sniffed. "Maria-chan was just living the only way she knows how to,"

"It's not like you were in a hurry to tell her about yourself either," Oyaji remarked. "You were being cowardly." Sometimes I thought he honestly wasn't the sort of man that should have had kids.

I got to my feet, grabbing a cup from the cabinet. "Did you expect me to just tell her when I thought she was a human?" that would have been like saying our vows then and there.

Oka-san followed my train of thought and sighed. "If you can justify not telling her then she can justify not telling you.

I poured myself a glass of juice and bitterly looked forward to sitting down and eating. "How did you feel when you found out your sister was your half sister and had been keeping your own heritage a secret?"

"That's completely different. She was lying, both you and Maria have been withholding information; it's not the same."

"They're completely different," I sarcastically agreed.

Oyaji kicked me under the table when I sat down again. Oka-san was oblivious.

"Are we eating or not?" Oyaji demanded.

She grudgingly dished out our supper, setting it down and sending the forks rattling across the table. I was already planning where next to sleep.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Shiranui's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>It had taken a bit of effort but with the cooperation of various clans the Agano had managed to set up a wide area of surveillance. Thanks to that there had already been several sightings of the red haired man in locations where nihilistic demon gangs were known to frequent.<p>

Kaname had been ordered to search a location and naturally I was selected to go with him. I had yet to decide if it was him or me that they were trying to keep under lock and key.

He was pretty good at his job but he did take unnecessary risks at times. I might still be notorious for my loose attitude but Agano's leader, Shou, must have trusted me enough to partner me up with his son.

Hell, I probably didn't even notice how docile I really had become in the last few years.

Kaname was fiddling away on his cell phone, most likely checking the map of the area.

"Anything?" I asked. We had already checked out a bunch of buildings. We even ran into a few people that weren't too happy to see us. They were only small fish though and ran away the moment I drew my gun from my holster.

"There are a couple small buildings behind these ones here. Let's check them out,"

I followed without question. He was of the mind to go whether or not I followed anyways.

We ran into someone the moment we rounded the corner. He actually startled Kaname, which didn't help his cause. Kaname instinctually popped him one, knocking him flat on his ass; out cold.

We stepped over him, not seeing anything particularly remarkable about his appearance. He wasn't anyone we'd have to worry about.

Apparently he wasn't a very good judge of security. A few moments later we ran into trouble in the form of an innocent girl.

Kaname noticed her first, drawing his knife and gesturing. I pulled my gun and prepared to back him up. He moved in. However, she was

alerted by his movements thanks to an interruption by one of the other men.

She lunged at Kaname, morphing midair, becoming a fierce looking panther. I narrowly avoided a crate thrown by the other man. They were probably the only two aware of our presence, at the moment, so I refrained from shooting.

Kaname held his own against the Bakeneko, staving her off by stabbing her muzzle with his knife. The guy who was pursuing me seemed to be more physically inclined than paranormally. That suited me fine.

We needed to end it quickly; otherwise the whole base would be down on us. The muscle head after me closed in and I grabbed his arm as he thrust a punch in my face. I twisted him around and forced his head against the building's wall.

He slid to the ground. I looked back to Kaname, expecting him to have similarly subdued his opponent. Instead, I jumped to his aid.

The Bakeneko had captured his arm in her great maw, shaking him to and fro. I lifted my gun and aimed, shooting her dead center in the head. Her ghostly spectral cat cloak disintegrated and I felt a pang in my chest. I hadn't killed anyone in quite a while.

Kaname, freed, dropped to the ground and held his bleeding arm. I could see from where I stood that the bones in his fore arm were cleanly snapped.

His eyes slanted and he saw something that was blocked from my view.

"Retreat!" he shouted, mustering what strength he had left.

A charged current ran through my body and the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. I dived behind a pile of stacked wooden boxes, bullets splintering the wood and narrowly missing me. Kaname had pushed himself out of immediate danger but had taken bullets to his legs.

I thought he had fainted at first but he just barely held onto his consciousness. Blood pumped from three holes on his legs. The wounds were already trying to knit together but that wouldn't help much if his bones had been more than nicked.

Maybe fifteen sets of pounding footsteps approached. They weren't shooting at the moment and I darted across, lifting Kaname over my shoulders.

"Shiranui-san, leave me . . . you can't get out of here while carrying me."

My shoulder suddenly felt wet and I realized he'd been shot in the stomach as well. He was in a hard shape. Even demons could die of blood loss and if I didn't get him out of here soon that would be his fate.

"Don't bite your tongue yet!"

I pushed off, barely making it to the rooftop. My knee ached from the

effort of sending both my weight and Kaname's straight up some meters. Bullet shots followed and even a dagger thrown with dangerous force.

I did something else that I hadn't done in years. My hair whipped out behind me, a white trail in the evening darkness. It might have made me more of a target but I left them behind in record time.

A sense of nostalgia filled me but there was no time to savor the feeling. The bullet in Kaname's gut hadn't forced itself out yet or even sealed itself inside. He definitely needed medical attention.

Luckily, there were doctors that knew how to treat Oni in the twenty first century.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I ran out of options. I could have gone to a hotel somewhere but figured that was going a little too far. There were probably a couple other acquaintances that I could call on but it was still going too far.<p>

Returning to the apartment was a little odd. It had the sort of scent you expected when returning home after a long vacation, even though I had only been absent for three days, at most.

It was quiet and I thought for a moment that Maria was absent. I discovered her lying motionless on her side upon walking through the narrow hall to the combined living room and kitchen.

She vacantly stared out the glass balcony door, silently picking at the fibers on the rug. I couldn't tell if she had been crying but her eyes looked just as dark as they had after the accident.

I hadn't considered if she'd even fully recovered from the trauma. Her body might have been fine but I doubted her psyche was.

A lot of painting and sculpting supplies had been strewn about the room as well. Nothing was left open or spilled but still left about. Maria normally kept everything nice and neat.

I took a quiet but deep breath and plopped down on the couch, my back to her. I felt like I could hear the buzz of the electricity running through the building.

Seeing her now, laid out like she was waiting for the end of the world, made me feel like shit. Softly, I greeted her.

"I'm home,"

"Welcome home," she returned, her voice crystalline. I couldn't tell if she was just detached or coolly affronted.

I put aside my own pride and tried to look at it from her perspective. She had suspected that I was more than human before I

had found out she was. All that time she'd been waiting for me to say something.

On the other hand, I'd been completely clueless about her and just made the decision to keep myself a secret to protect her freedom. I still saw it that her finding out tied herself to both myself and the rules of the Agano.

That she hadn't told me about herself made it seem like she was also rationalizing not sharing her entirety. Who was wrong first and most justified became the question.

I addressed my first apology. I sincerely hoped it would be the first and last.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have run off like I did," it was childish. "I just needed some time to cool off."

"I understand."

My eyes narrowed. I would have directed it at her but she was uninterested in even looking up from the rug. She had zero intentions of participating. I almost stood up and left, again.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I demanded.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she still hadn't moved. "I waited and waited for you to say something but you never trusted me."

"When did you begin suspecting that I wasn't all that I seemed?" that was one of the many things that ticked me off. How could she have noticed so quickly when I still hardly believed that she wasn't a human?

She huffed. "Right from the start,"

I snorted. "Yeah right,"

"Anyone with half a brain could tell after they saw you and your parents together. And it really doesn't help that you don't give one damn about the people around you,"

I seethed. Why was I the bad guy? "If our act was that pathetic you should have stayed away."

The temperature turned either icy or stifling hot.

"I felt safe."

My gut dropped and I clenched my jaws together. I had briefly considered that she couldn't help but be drawn to those that were most like her. She might pretend to be human but she was painfully conscious of the difference between her and the rest of the humans.

"What gave us away?"

"You can pass for your father's brother but when you stand next to Ayame it's easy to see that you have her nose and ears." She sat up, the satiny material of her blouse whispering. "That alone isn't

enough for the average person but you can't trick someone who depends on minute qualities for sculpting."

I laughed. Most of her intent looks were those of careful memorization. I thought it rather unexpected that her talent in sculpting would topple over her doubt and chisel out the truth. More than that, I found I couldn't stay mad at her.

"Are we going to try this again?"

"Yup. No secrets this time. Lay everything down,"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Oh my God x.x kill me now. I've been so bad recently e.e time to cut out some crappy pointless scenes.<strong>

## 16. It's a matter of trust

\*\*Please review!\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review, The Queen of Water. I appreciate your support :)\*\*

\*\*Hikiri, I will finish! I swear I will. If the fourteenth of December comes around and I'm not finished then I'll just have to extend it until after that. I want to be done with it on the fourteenth though x.x fourteen is my lucky number.\*\*

\*\*OMGoodness :D thanks for the long review, fallingwisteria! I fixed the mistakes you caught in chapter eleven :) there's a little mention of Hinata in this chapter, I think XD I'm trying not to flood the story with random scenes that have little importance so I can't promise I'll have a tattoo or smoking scene. It's summer though so maybe Maria will notice Ayame's tattoos when she wears a tank top or something. Thanks again for the review :D\*\*

\*\*Thanks to shoujok for reviewing many chapters of Hanashobu and continuing with Exotic Flower! I really appreciate it! I can't believe Hanashobu still gets such attention XD\*\*

\*\*Thanks to Unknown for reviewing as well! I'm glad you like the story!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower<p>

Chapter 16: It's a matter of trust.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>A little time had to be spent getting our relationship back on track. In the long run it would probably benefit the two of us. I always thought that difficulties made couples stronger.<p>

The only downside to Ren knowing was the fact that he continuously asked me about it and I hardly knew how to answer him. Since I had found out when I was fourteen I'd denied it until it almost went away.

"What exactly do you know for sure about yourself?"

"My unusualness, you mean?"

Ren closed his eye and took a deep breath through his nose to avoid rolling his eyes at me. "Don't say it like that. It makes me feel like an alien,"

I laughed at that. Alien was a great way to put it. "I don't think I can die at all. I mean, if I don't really need to breath and can't die from blood loss what can kill me? I'm not all that eager to find out,"

We were cuddling on the couch at the time, he half reading an art history book and me filing my nails down with a napkin on my lap. The book drooped in his hands and he tapped his foot on the ground.

"So you don't have above average physical strengths, at all?"

"Nope,"

"Other than not having to breathe," he seemed to find that sort of unnerving. "I suppose, if you had my advantages and never tired on top of that it would be God-like. Are you weak to anything?"

"Not that I know,"

He rumbled quietly and put down his art book, drawing me closer. It was a careful sort of closeness, like he was afraid to break me even though he knew I was indestructible.

"Does it matter?" I inquired.

"No . . . I worry but I guess there really isn't anything to worry about."

I perched on his chest and smoothed his fair bangs back. "Well, Mr. Alien, what are you weak to?"

He growled, only half seriously. "Typically, I'd be allergic to silver. Oka-san is of a rather special bloodline though so it's rendered obsolete."

"You guys sound like werewolves!" I chuckled. "Can you transform?"

He didn't respond and I sat up, fixing him with a hard look.

"What?" he whined. "It isn't important. There's no need to transform in this day and age,"

I pinched his side and he jumped. "What do you transform in to?"

"An Oni?" he shrugged. "There isn't that much of a change. Eye color, hair color, horns,"

"Horns?! Can I see?"

He reclined back on the chair and rubbed his chin. "Too much trouble,"

I would have assaulted him with a tickle attack (he was almost unnaturally ticklish) but there was a knock on the door. Whoever it was barged in right after that and I scrambled to get off Ren. He held me down by my wrist though and I felt myself blushing.

"Sorry to intrude," Toshio called. He turned the corner and almost walked into the wall when he back pedaled. Ren's cousin Suzumu didn't heed us at all and sat in the arm chair across from us, browsing his iPhone.

Ren grumbled. "Can't you see we're busy?"

"Dhampir?" Suzumu randomly asked. "Nephilim? How about changeling? There's such a broad variety of Western demons," he lamented. "What about Middle Eastern demons? Your nose is kind of Middle Eastern,"

I held my nose defensively. "It is not!"

"Just ignore them," Ren advised. "They'll go away eventually,"

\* \* \*

><p>Since the spat Ayame had been inviting us over more frequently, hoping to help smooth things out in her own little way. Good food and good company was her idea of improving moods.</p>

She thought I should have been learning how to cook as well, though in the end she was doing all the work and I was just doing the dishes and cleaning up behind her. I was fine with it since she chatted away.

"How are you and Ren?"

I turned the sink tap off quickly. "Well, we've forgiven but not quite forgotten."

"I see," she returned a lid to a simmering dish and sat on the counter next to me. "I don't know who he gets that from. Chikage can't stay mad at me at all,"

I bit my lip. "He still thinks I was hiding it from him and not just doing what I normally would do. He also says I should have had the sense to tell him after noticing something was off about him as well,"

She scoffed. "Like he has a lot of sense. He's just a hermit. He turned a hundred and forty-one back in March, you know."

I instinctively wanted to cover my ears and shout that I couldn't hear her but the damage was done. I turned to look at her slowly but her look was so thoughtful that I knew she couldn't possibly be joking. She didn't even seem to realize she'd just told me I was

dating someone that was a century older than me.

Her eyes widened a moment later and I couldn't stop myself from suddenly bursting into a fit of laughter.

"I'm sorry; I forgot that your social standards are a lot different," she apologized.

I bit back a chortle and wiped a tear from my eye. "I don't think I really care. It was just the look on your face,"

She grinned awkwardly. "If it makes you feel any better there's almost thirty years between me and Chikage,"

"I don't know, Ayame-san. That almost seems normal compared to Ren and me," it actually didn't bother me, which was more than a little gross. He was old enough to be like a great-great grandfather or something.

She nibbled her thumb. "Truthfully, that's a pretty big gap; even amongst demons."

I was either going to melt into an embarrassed blob on the floor or crack up again. A change in topic was needed. "What was Chikage's and your relationship like when you were younger?"

She readily accepted the change of direction.

"When I met Chikage I was just fifteen. I lived in Hokkaido back then on an enshrined mountain belonging to a great Tengu. By whim, I found myself walking down the side of the mountain when I couldn't sleep. I found Chikage there, half dead."

My jaw dropped. "When was this? What happened to him?"

"I think it was eighteen sixty-nine. He'd followed his rival all the way to the battlefield and lost to him in dual to the death. Luckily Oni heal fast and the sword aimed at his heart missed,"

Wow. Luckily.

She continued, a small dimple forming with her half smirk. "We didn't get along at first but I was just a brat back then with goals I thought I would never realize. Chikage had lower standards for his potential spouse as well. He got one good look at my tattoos and was convinced I was half witted."

I had noticed the faded butterflies on Ayame's knees before. I thought they might have intentionally been that way but guessed they had just faded a lot since she had them done.

"So what changed?" I asked. "How did the two of you get together?"

"Chikage saw the possibility and started looking out for me. He genuinely cared for me and was willing to wait as long as need be for me to see the same things he did."

Ren had tried to do the same for me but even if I hadn't intentionally done it I had betrayed his trust.

The front door opened and an unfamiliar voice called out. Ayame slid off the counter and went to greet him.

"Souji, Nanami-chan! How are you two?"

I followed after her and waved, greeting them. The woman was quite a bit taller than Ayame but was clearly related to her.

"Maria, this is my daughter Nanami and her husband Hijikata Souji."

Nanami stretched a hand out to me. "Fujiwara-san, it's nice to finally meet you."

I shook it somewhat nervously. I knew Ren was the oldest and vaguely knew he had siblings but I'd never expected to meet them. Nanami seemed a lot older than he was.

The man looked more traditionally Japanese, though his eyes were so dark that it was hard to tell if they were brown, purple, blue, or black. Toshio's bright and glossy purple eyes came to mind and I almost couldn't contain the realization that Toshio was Ren's nephew.

I was about to put my hand out to shake his but the smile froze on my lips. He had an awfully unfriendly look in his eyes. He still hadn't said anything to me and made no move to lift his hand either. In fact, he stuck his right one in his pocket.

Ren appeared from the living room and lightly rested his hand on my waist. I looked away from Souji and smiled at Ren, trusting him to answer the question in my eyes later or at least sooth the smarting social rejection.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"I don't know about that one."<p>

I scowled at Souji. He'd had a sour look on his face the entire time Maria had been here. He might not have said anything while she was present but then it ticked me off that he hadn't even said a word of greeting to her.

"Isn't it too much of a coincidence that the moment there's a foreign threat here she, a foreign demon of disputed origin, gets close to you and the most important family in Japan?"

"We aren't the most important family in Japan," Oka-san reminded Souji. "Shou's the head of Agano so his descendants are the most important family in Japan,"

Souji snorted. "And you're his mother,"

Shiranui set his glass down, ice clinking against the frosted glass tumbler. He'd arrived shortly after Maria left for work. "We've been

looking for a red haired man this entire time without any indication that he associates with anyone besides the gangs. There's no connection between him and Maria. Besides, there are lots of English speaking countries in the West and we don't even know if the red haired man is English."

I wasn't about to tell him that the red haired man was probably English. At least, that's what it had seemed like when I helped him with his order at Tanaka's. Or that he seemed to have an interest in Maria.

Maria definitely didn't know about demon society though. If she did she wouldn't have been alone and relying on herself for so long.

That I had seen the red haired man twice when Shiranui and Kaname had only barely glimpsed him when actively looking for him was already too much of a coincidence. The only possible reason for my sighting him was my connection to Maria. He had to have been pursuing Maria as he had shown up at both Tanaka's Soba-ya and the mall when Maria conveniently passed by.

Well, there was still the chance that I was just lucky (or unlucky) and even that he was actually after me. I wouldn't accept that Maria was still holding something back from me.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Summer holidays began with little fanfare. When I brought up my planned trip to Hokkaido for two weeks he waved shortly with a dimpled frown and said "See you in two weeks."<p>

It took showing him the plane tickets that'd I had already picked up to convince him to come with me. I exaggerated the price a little and tried to keep my irritation at bay. Getting him to pack was a pain in the neck too.

He paused in the doorway just before we left.

"Do I really have to go?"

"Ren!" I complained. I would have sworn that he just didn't want to get on a plane. "It's beautiful and very relaxing! When else am I going to get an opportunity to air out my chalet and kick back and do nothing?"

"Couldn't we have gone by train? Or even car. The Toyota's good for the highway."

I stopped to stare at him. "Are you serious?"

"I've never flown before and neither do I intend to now," he replied grumpily.

"You poor old dog. Come one, I can't drive myself to the airport," he was being such a baby. I wasn't worried though; I would make him go

if I had to drag him. That might have proven difficult if he wasn't so proud.

Once we reached the airport he sucked up his doubts and got on the plane. Only then did I remind him that if it crashed I would probably be the only one to survive. I said it jokingly but he glared daggers at me the entire time afterwards and gripped the armrest so hard I thought it was going to break.

We arrived in Hokkaido without event and he forgave me by the time his complexion improved.

The flowers were in full bloom and smelled just the way I remembered.

"We can go hiking, swimming, camping, have a fire pit, go fishing, visit the hot springs, and enter a ping pong tournament . . ."

"Hokkaido has an air of eternity." He cut in. "Nothing seems to change here. Even now the air is alive with the buzz of youki and remaining barriers,"

I curiously regarded him. "There are demons here even now?"

"Old ones. Godly demons that never seem to die,"

"Did you grow up here?"

He shook his head. "I visited a bit. Oka-san's half-sister lived her life out here as a half demon and Tochigami. There's also the old residence and grave of Souji's parents."

Souji seemed to be a close friend of his and I thought that was maybe why he hadn't given me a proper explanation for his behavior. All he would say was that Souji was weary of strangers and carefully dealt out his trust.

"So, you walked here on this soil more than a hundred years ago?"

He measured my intent carefully before nodding.

"You're such an old man!" I joked. I could hardly believe it was true but had decided it was alright since he seemed to be about as mature as I was.

Without warning he pushed me down into the long grass and wildflowers that decorated the side of the gravel road we were walking up. He roughly nuzzled the crook of my neck and I giggled, thrilled that he wasn't handling me like a porcelain doll.

He backed off and I frowned. Did I bother him when I mentioned his age?

He swiftly tucked a wild daisy behind my ear and pressed a kiss to my lips. It was soft and sweet, like a promise.

A short while later (it might have actually been a good hour) we managed to reach my chalet. There was note of the door from my father letting me know where the key was hidden and that several things had

been updated and everything was in working order. He encouraged me to stay for as long as I wanted as well.

"I thought you said you and your father weren't close?"

"We aren't. He's just a really nice guy,"

"Are you sure? He left you his address and seems like he wants you to visit him. It seems like he misses you,"

I shrugged. "He usually takes me out to dinner somewhere and asks about everyday things. I think he's just being polite,"

Ren raised an eyebrow but shook the apprehension off his face.  
"You'll go visit him, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. Not right now though."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Sorry about being so slow x.x lots of good and bad things have happened since mid October and sometimes there comes a time when I have to dedicate some time to the people around me. Six or seven more chapters to go. I'll edit later and update tomorrow or the next day if the little typos and errors bother you.<strong>

## 17. If the shoe fits

\*\*Sorry for falling so far behind but I'll try and update as quickly as possible now that there's less than a month until my planned ending x.x I won't be updating according to a schedule anymore so just expect it to conclude sometime from now until the fourteenth of December.\*\*

\*\*The Queen of Water; thanks for the review! I appreciate your continued support :)\*\*

\*\*Fallingwisteria, thank you! You do so well with your work! I noticed a particular snotty review for the twenty-eighth chapter :( if they had a PM address I would have let them have it. It's a fanfiction and your story; you can do whatever the hell you want with it. Good luck and thanks for the praise!\*\*

\*\*Hikiri, I'm sorry for not updating in so long x.x I was never gone, by the way :O I have no life so I'm always lurking on fanfiction ;D it's nice that someone noticed Souji's name XD and even if it wasn't a Friday it was a fourteenth :P I always post on the fourteenth.\*\*

\*\*To my dear Unknown guest! Thanks for the review. Sorry for being so late with it but I've been on cloud nine since the middle of October XD that and a lot of tests just hit me at once Q.Q\*\*

\*\*Thanks to blueberry761 for reviewing Hanashobu!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower<p>

## Chapter 17: If the shoe fits . . .

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I hadn't been to Hokkaido in many, many, years. There was an overwhelming sense of nostalgia, even though I hadn't lived there myself. I had been a bit reluctant to come (especially by airplane) but now that I was here, with Maria, it was the highlight of my summer.<p>

We'd done a bunch of things that we normally didn't have the option to do. We had done just about every activity the resort had to offer and few that we'd improvised upon. Such as skinny dipping in a nearly inaccessible onsen on the other side of the mountain.

A week had already gone by and I was wishing it would never end. Being able to just sit on the couch in the front room of the chalet and talk for hours and hours without having to be somewhere or preparing something for art school was great. I suppose I understood how my parents never got bored of each other, even though neither one of them had to work anywhere thanks to old money.

"Ren," she murmured, curling chunks of my hair around her finger delicately. It was a hobby of hers.

"Yeah?"

"Don't cut your hair."

"I can't just let it keep growing," I retorted. "I might have been able to do that during my youth but there's no way I'd get away with it now," it was a relief that she didn't seem to care about the huge age gap.

The hair twirling slowed. She was probably trying to imagine me as an actual young person, with long hair to boot. "Why not? Your hair is so nice,"

I snorted. "It's not exactly acceptable right now,"

"Social standards don't apply to artists," she stopped the hair twirling all together and climbed into my lap, resting her head on my shoulder. It was fairly late.

"It'd be too inconvenient,"

She whined quietly. A moment passed and I thought she might have fallen asleep but she looked up and nipped my jaw with a toothy kiss. She kept at it, pinching hickies into the crook of my neck. She slowed down and lightly pressed her lips underneath my ear, sucking gently.

Sparks danced behind my half closed eyelids and I sank into the sofa. I didn't even bother trying to keep up with her anymore. It was just easier to let her do what she wanted. Even if I did take control of the situation she'd have it back in a few minutes.

I wrapped my hands around her waist and softly trailed my hands across her lower back. It was about all I had the willpower for at the moment. Her kisses were dizzying. The whole no-breathing thing really gave her the advantage. I wondered if she even felt the same weightless sensation.

It sobered me up and I shook myself from the hypnotic stupor. "You still haven't gone to meet your father," what if she really didn't feel the same way I did at all? I didn't doubt that we loved each other but it'd be embarrassing if I was the only one who felt so weak.

She sat up, still perched on my chest. "It'll cut into the time we have together,"

I scoffed. "Don't worry. We still have time and just think, we live together back in the city as well. Your father doesn't get to see you very often."

Maria still wasn't that eager to make the arrangement. "Come with me?"

I deliberated for a moment. "I should introduce myself to him. Does he even know you have a boyfriend?"

"Nope."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Ren was set on me going to visit my father. I didn't really have the same attachment to family as he did but I wanted to change. Family was everything to Ren. I probably would never have the same connection with my family but I was determined to show I was willing.<p>

I wanted things to work out with me and Ren even more since having a temporary and short break up.

I called the morning after and, like usual, it sounded like Dad had been in the middle of something important.

"\_Hello?\_"

"Hi, Dad, it's me. Sorry for not calling sooner,"

"\_Maria? It's of no concern. How are you?\_"

"I'm great. You sound well,"

"\_Yes, I've been well. How has school been? Have you been taking care of yourself? I hope you haven't been eating out every day,\_"

I laughed. "Don't worry. I eat home cooked meals most days,"

"\_Oh? You've learned to cook a little then?\_"

"I'm living with someone who's quite a good cook. Do you still want to go out and have dinner, by the way?"

"\_That would be nice. We haven't talked face to face for some time now. Who is it that you live with? A friend?\_"

"My boyfriend. He's here now and I was thinking the three of us could have dinner together,"

Ren, who was cooking breakfast, gave a little exasperated sigh and shook his head at the ceiling.

"\_Your boyfriend . . . ? I hope he's keeping you happy.\_" He answered cautiously.

"He makes me very happy, Dad. Don't worry,"

"\_I'm sure he wouldn't mind if I borrowed you for the evening,\_"

"He was thinking he should introduce himself to you anyways. He's very old fashioned," I joked. "Won't it be easier if we all had dinner together?"

"\_Hmm. I suppose,\_"

"This evening, right?"

"\_Yes. We'll eat at the usual place,\_"

"Okay, see you there. Bye-bye."

I hung up and plopped down next to Ren at the kitchen table.

"Was that so hard?" Ren teased.

"But I wanted to have you all to myself!" I fussed. It was kind of sad just how addicted I was to his person.

\* \* \*

><p>As it was we were barely on time for the dinner that evening. We arrived just after seven (my dad always had supper later) at the resort's main building and were led by a rather snobby waiter to a traditional private room.</p>

He sniffed for the hundredth time and I grit my teeth.

"The president of the resort has always kept rather odd company. I can see that Maria-sama does the same,"

I was frankly quite stunned that he was bold enough to make such a comment. He obviously wasn't too worried about getting fired.

Ren glowered at the waiter but didn't say anything. He gave me a slight disapproving look as well, probably because I made no indication of defending myself or my father.

It was kind of odd that he was so involved with his family and I wasn't. It was kind of like a Buddhist trying to marry someone

Shinto. It just wasn't normal. I should have put more effort in knowing my dad. I planned on staying in Japan so it was even more important now.

"Here you are," the waiter mocked. I was going to be glad to be free of the carping bastard.

We entered the traditional room, both somewhat unenthusiastically. The atmosphere wasn't very nice.

Dad looked up, startled and then somehow disgusted right from the start. I sarcastically thought it was going to be a typical meeting between future father-in-law and son-in-law.

I quickly realized there was something off about the stinging glare and wondered if they somehow already knew each other.

"You are dismissed," my father reminded the waiter. He seemed to be waiting for something to snap as well. Wouldn't he love to share just how disapproving his boss was of his daughter's boyfriend?

He grudgingly left and the sharpness in Dad's dull green eyes grew.

"Kazama Ren," Dad greeted stiffly, the subtle wrinkles on his forehead and around his lips deepening as he stood up. He almost looked ready to snarl. "I see you are as gifted with longevity and youth as your mother and father,"

Ren inclined his chin but stubbornly held it straight right after. "You're fairing much better than your father before you."

"Why you insolent, lowly cur!"

There was a dangerous glow in their eyes and I waved my arms dramatically. "Excuse me! Just how do the two of you know each other?"

Dad's anger was assuaged as he looked at me. "I should be asking the same. Maria, how much do you know about this man?"

"Enough," I quipped back. I suddenly felt very insecure. "Dad, who are you? Who are you really?" that Ren knew him must have meant my dad, who I would have chosen as my human parent over my eccentric mother, was some kind of Japanese demon as well.

"Wakehisa Wakahiro," Ren responded dully and I felt like giving him a dirty look. I had known my father as Fujiwara Akito all these years. "He's a pureblooded Oni and was the heir to the Northern Oni clan more than a hundred years ago,"

"Dad?"

His tight lipped frown didn't budge. "Why are you here, Maria? Why are you here with this man? You should be amongst your kind, not bound to a demon."

The crashing situation was hauling me down with it. I normally remained aloof from the reality of my own unusualness but now that the truth was in front of me I could hardly remain upright.

"You never told me, and you never asked. Do you really expect me to tell you what I've been through? That I'll just accept that you had the answers all this time and forgive you?"

His unchanging features twitched and maybe his green eyes opened wider by a fraction of an inch. "You don't mean . . . ?"

I turned from them and meant to storm from the room but Ren caught my wrist. "This is your chance to sort things out." I wasn't certain if he was talking to me or my father.

"Your mother told me it was unlikely that you would ever truly awaken as a demon,"

"Well, I did," I snapped. A sickly warm feeling was starting to fill my head. If Dad was an Oni and I wasn't anything like an Oni . . . then what was my mother?

Dad sat down, unsure and weary. "When?"

"I don't know. I can't remember ever having a cut as a child so who knows. I was forced to admit I wasn't human six years ago; here on the ski slope."

His eyes lit up, remembering the incident. "The broken skis . . . ?"

I nodded tightly. "I went away from the normal route and fell off a ledge."

"And you survived something that should normally have been deadly," he guessed.

"No, I definitely should have died. I landed headfirst on exposed rocks,"

I expected that his jaw would maybe drop but he didn't even flinch. My chest felt hot and my breath was uncomfortably dry. My temper was normally quite mild but I didn't even feel like the same person at that moment. Like the girl who had walked in had left some time ago, leaving an angry doppelganger.

All of a sudden I tore forwards, taking a hold of his collar and shaking him. "How can you just sit there? Don't you understand? I can't die even if I wanted to; I can't even feel any kind of physical pain to anchor me down!" hot tears spilled down my face. "It's like I don't belong anywhere. My own father didn't even see,"

There was a deep and heavy guilt in his eyes and I unwillingly detached my hands from his shirt.

"Your mother didn't notice either?"

"What do you think?" I spat. "She shipped me off to a boarding school, remember?"

His jaw tightened and I realized he hadn't known. "Even if I wanted to help you, it's obvious that you don't take after me. I would give you any support I could provide but I know little of your mother's

own peculiarities. It might be best to return to Europe and ask her, "

I thought Ren might have objected and glanced back at him. He wouldn't stop me from going but he had the sort of expression that made me think he was resolute to go with me.

"I won't go," I replied.

Dad closed his eye, thinking hard. "That relieves me. Your mother's lot are quite different from demons here in Japan. They cling rigidly to their old beliefs,"

I felt like crying. How had things become so broken off from reality? What exactly was my mother? How could I have been demon all along and not known, had no one tell me? Was it so easy for a demon to mistakenly believe that they were human?

Ren lightly took my forearm, pulling me to his chest so that I might hide my tears. Dad grumbled quietly.

"Do you plan on marrying my daughter?" that almost seemed to bother my father even more than discovering I had awakened as a demon. "The Kazama really will have dominated the four cardinal families with that."

"What comes to pass, comes to pass,"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>The remainder of our holiday passed uneventfully, except for the fact that Maria decked the waiter on the way out from our dinner with her father.<p>

It was an enlightening trip, though Maria seemed to wish that she had never found out. I was personally pleased with the knowledge. Knowing that she was Oni made it seem less like a doomed relationship.

She made me promise to not bring it up for the rest of the trip and after that we just relaxed. It was perfect for rekindling feelings that had been damaged.

The trip ended almost too soon and we found ourselves back in the city, hanging out with Toshio again.

We were walking back to the apartment just after twelve from visiting an art exhibition. The art college had issued a summer break project for everyone. When the next semester started we were all supposed to have a written report on ten art museums that we either went to in person or read about. That and information on three exhibitions.

Toshio was complaining loudly about it. He hated writing.

"We're art students, not reporters! I did not sign up for this!"

Maria sighed. "I agree. I really hate writing. My kanji is terrible,"

I didn't care at all. "I'm already finished,"

They both groaned.

Despite it being so late there was still quite a bit on the go. We had decided to walk along a less busy road, the back of restaurants showing.

I was thinking it was almost too peaceful; a pleasantly warm night and the buzz of downtown nightlife, not even a sign of sirens echoing.

Shiranui touched down right after that, tripping on the curb and stumbling forwards, tipping a garbage can over.

Maria grabbed onto my arm, startled. Toshio almost fell back onto a pile of garbage bags, swinging his arms for balance.

"Yo!" Shiranui greeted, breathlessly. "Nice night, eh?"

I smelt the gun smoke and blood before I noticed his discreetly hidden gun. "What happened to your arm?"

Shiranui pointed his chin at a bloody streak on his arm questionably. "Oh, this? Got nicked by a bullet back there. Already healed. You guys might want to clear out of here. There's an angry bunch back there somewhere,"

The words hadn't even died on his breath when Maria jumped forward, blonde hair flashing in the semi dark. She shoved Toshio out of the way and into Shiranui with surprising force; enough to knock two Oni off their feet. A muted gunshot followed and Maria spun in a half circle, hitting the ground hard.

Shiranui was up immediately and aimed his gun in the general direction, opening fire. Under his cover I gathered Maria up, balancing her over my shoulder to drag Toshio into the alleyway for cover.

"Maria!"

Toshio's expression was horrified. I heard the heavy splats of the blood leaking from her wound but had yet to get a good look at it. I doubted it would disturb me after seeing her hiding in the hydrangea bush.

"This is bad . . . !"

He was, no doubt, convinced she was dead. I would have been convinced as well, save for her heart beating against my shoulder blade. Shiranui ducked into the alleyway after us.

I didn't appreciate Toshio's freaking out. It was making me worry. She was absolutely still.

Shiranui was staring quite hard at her as well. His eyes were awfully

round. "Is she dead?"

"She got shot in the head! What the hell do you think?!" Toshio was completely hysterical.

At that Maria twitched and patted me on the back. I set her back on her feet and Toshio's rambling went silent.

"Chill, Toshio, I'm fine. I've seen my own brain before,"

I clearly got a look at the wound then. From the back at least.

She'd been shot clean through the head, a chunk of her scalp blown apart on the back of her head. The skin was beginning to bunch together, smoothing out as her hair grew back, glowing gold. It matched length with the rest in just a few moments.

The same must have been happening to the entry wound as Toshio turned promptly away to throw up. Maria absently lifted her hand and felt around her face until she found it.

I took a step forward, curious. Her left eyelid had barely been marked by the bullet, save for the evening out of the tone from scar tissue back to normal.

She blinked quickly a couple times and each time her eyeball seemed to fill out a little more. The sclera was dark red, almost black, in places and the green iris was bright as it closed around her suddenly elongated pupil.

Two demons dropped down into the alley further up and Shiranui fired generously at them. He whistled between shots. "What a woman you've got there, Ren."

Toshio wiped his mouth and cleared his throat. "Can we please just get out of here?"

I pulled Maria close and nodded to him, tensing to bolt. "See you later."

Shiranui could handle Toshio.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Please review!<strong>

## 18. Grave Robbing

\*\*Please review!\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review, The Queen of Water!\*\*

\*\*Hikiri! I'm glad you're still sticking around :D yes, Toshio is named after his grandfather. Shiranui is one of my favorite Oni as well. Well, I love all the Oni except Kaoru and Koudou.\*\*

\*\*XD I have no time for snotty reviewers so you let them have it, fallingwisteria! I'm glad you like Toshio. I find him really fun to

incorporate into the story. Also, he didn't see her scalp regenerating; he saw her eye in its first stages regenerating. Maria herself noticed that she lost a bit of grey matter and Toshio probably saw that as well. Yum!\*\*

\*\*Thanks again, my Unknown Guest :D I really appreciate it!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower</p>

Chapter 18: Grave Robbing

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV</strong>

\* \* \*

><p>The new semester began and the summer season was drawing to a close.</p>

I usually didn't have to stay late to finish art projects (especially early in the game), or even go to the art studio connected with the college at all. Once upon a time I could do all my work at home and be done with plenty of time to spare. Living with Maria made that impossible for lots of reasons.

She'd been putting less hours in at work recently and seemed to be using her hours at home more wisely for art. I wasn't complaining but Maria having work done before me meant that she was bothering me when I was supposed to be working on art.

It was getting too late to continue, unless I wanted to drool on my work, so I locked up and deposited the spare key under a rock near the door. It was supposed to be closed at night but some poor art student always had to borrow it.

There was no moon to be seen in the sky. The tar-like shadows were disconcerting in that I could barely see to my car in the far end of the parking lot.

I balked when the visage of a man broke through the dark haze. I hadn't sensed him at all. Uneasily I stepped closer. It dawned on me that he was the same foreigner with curly brown hair that had first appeared.

"\_Good evening,\_" he spoke suddenly, in English. Before I could think to return the greeting he started again, in Japanese. "Good evening, Kazama Ren."

"Who are you?" I growled, all thoughts of courtesy discontinued.

"My, so touchy." He replied dryly. "I'm Thomas, nice to meet you too. I suppose you've noticed that your girlfriend isn't just some run of the mill demon by now."

I didn't appreciate him talking about Maria as though she was just a 'girlfriend.' Girlfriend didn't exactly leave a lasting impression.

He smirked a little and I snapped.

Without really thinking I swung at him. He could have been some weak ass demon for all I cared and I would have still nailed him as hard as I could.

My fist didn't connect at all though. Like a hologram, my hand passed straight through him. A smoky trail followed and he walked calmly a few passes away before the haziness around him cleared and he became, probably, solid again.

"You see, I was also surprised when I heard about Maria. Everyone thought for sure she was just as mortal as her supposed father,"

"What do you mean?" I snarled. I was trying to devise some plan to take him down. I supposed if I transformed and charged at him quick enough he wouldn't have time to magically become smoke.

"When Succubi and even Jinn like me, or most Western demons for that matter, have children with humans the result is normally a completely mortal child."

I considered that for a moment. I already knew Maria's father was Wakehisa Wakahiro, a pureblooded Oni.

"However, before she left for Japan a close friend of her family â€“ noticed that she had become somewhat off. I let that slip to the wrong people,"

"What are you saying?" I challenged. I didn't think he really had anything to say, other than to lead me on or in circles.

Urgently he leaned in closer, risking still that I might clobber him. "I'm telling you to keep a closer eye on Maria. I've been tasked with watching over her for some time but that does not permit to bodily protect her."

I held back my desire to pay him back for being a creep. He'd just admitted that he'd been checking in on Maria that day in the parking lot. He could have been checking in on her secretly quite frequently; being able to become like smoke made him even guiltier in my eyes.

Before I could articulate a retort that wasn't with my fists a silver wire shot from the darkness like a bullet. It swung back, wrapping around his neck and yanking him a few steps away.

A chill ran down my spine and several paces away the darkness melted away, presenting a familiar red haired demon. He was plainly intent to kill the demon called Thomas. He rested his hand on a rapier at his side, ornamental in appearance with knotted silver cord around the sheath.

"Plâ€"ease . . . ! Protect her," he gasped, eyes rolling into the back of his head as he struggled to remain on his feet.

The demon approached, pulling the wire tighter. Thomas's body was apparently trying to turn to smoke but fell short of that state. He dropped heavily on his knees, gripping the silver cord

desperately.

I shook myself from the state of confusion and grabbed the wire, trying to snap it. A sharp jolt burned through my body and I instinctively let go.

The red haired man closed the distance between himself and Thomas, drawing his rapier and thrusting it through the kneeling man's chest.

A horrified expression flashed on the strange demon's face before he burst into flame, flanks and ash whipping about. I caught the eyes of the scarlet haired menace and froze.

His black sclera and tainted golden irises literally held me in place. It wasn't unlike old hag, except I definitely knew I wasn't dreaming.

Without hurrying he sauntered towards me, pointing the rapier at me. I didn't doubt that the sword was imbued with silver just as the wire had been. I just hoped there was no electrical current in the sword.

Haphazardly he poked the sword through my chest, missing organs by millimeters. He might have been doing it on purpose, assuming I would suffer as most other demons did when they came into contact with silver.

Instead, the pain shook me from the control of his hypnotic eyes and I heaved back, holding a shaky hand to my chest.

He was momentarily surprised and I used it to my advantage. I transformed and fled.

\* \* \*

><p>I was a more than a little miffed when Maria called at three o'clock in the morning. I thought she would have been at home (which was why I had gone to the art studio in the first place) but instead she was out on a late night job.</p>

"\_Ren? Can I ask you a favor?\_"

I was still beating myself up for getting stabbed quite brilliantly in the chest but even more upset that I'd left my Toyota. Never mind that I couldn't head straight back to the apartment until I knew for sure I wasn't being followed.

"Sure," I replied.

"\_Can I introduce my coworker, Tsubaki Takamaru, to Shiranui? He's been bugging me about it for a while now.\_"

I groaned, partly because the request was stupid and partly because my chest cavity was closing up. I really appreciated my mother's immunity to silver at times like these. "Why the hell does he want to meet Shiranui? How does he even know him?"

"\_Well, occasionally I do talk about you guys. Of course I don't say anything strange but I did mention that Shiranui has an interesting

job and investigates certain problematic groups . . .\_"

"And does Tsubaki Takamaru want in?" I mocked.

"Well, yeah. He knows a little about it and he's pretty good when it comes monitoring areas and such. Shiranui's working alone too, since Kaname was injured.\_"

I thought to tell her about the red haired demon that killed someone related to her in some way scarcely forty-five minutes. She wouldn't recommend a mere human to help out if she knew.

It was enough that I'd have to tell the Agano all about it and then soothe Oka-san's worries and eventually explain it to Maria in a way that she wouldn't freak out. I let it slide for the moment.

I cringed a little and checked the wound. It wasn't exactly bleeding anymore but I really shouldn't have even considered pseudo teleporting for a day or two. Not if I didn't want to rip the wound open.

"Is something the matter?"

"Nah. Just a little tired," I would come clean later but not while we were talking over the phone. She'd just try to find me, probably. The Beni-hime's cursed blood ran through my veins anyways. A flippantly inflicted wound like this wouldn't seriously bother me.

"Well, can you set up a meeting tomorrow? It'll be Shiranui's decision anyways. I just want him to get off my back about it,\_"

"Okay, I'll do it," I regretted it the moment I said it but really just wanted to get off the phone and mope over the injury. It wouldn't take long for Maria to notice it later. The scarring would probably last for a week or two.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Shiranui's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>When I arrived at the coffee shop Ren and Maria had taken seats outside, legs hooked together under the table. I distinctly didn't want to intrude so I sat at the table next to them.<p>

"So, what's up?"

Maria took a sip of her frothy drink, deliberating for a moment. "Well, I have this friend who likes to stick his nose into other peoples' business. He wants to help with your information gathering,"

I didn't even bother answering; just gave her a disapproving stare.

"I know there are barriers between humans and demons but if he never asks what does it matter?"

If he didn't ask it didn't present much of a problem but I still doubted that it would work out. The shit would hit the fan the minute the Agano found out and it wouldn't take them long to notice.

"Will he be asking for money?"

"He's swimming in money. I doubt he'd ask for a lot or even any at all."

"How can he even help? He doesn't know the circumstances or the first thing about how we operate,"

She slurped her latte, pursing her lips after. "He noticed we were being followed a while ago and when he brought it up I started noticing too. I think I might have more to do with the happenings on your end," she confessed.

Ren looked away slightly. He apparently hadn't told Maria anything himself. I would have to have a nice chat with him afterwards as he seemed to know even more.

Maria glanced up and waved. Her friend had apparently shown up.

"Tsubaki-san!" she called, a frown creasing between her eyebrows.  
"Takamaru!"

I followed her gaze, looking for the daft human.

My jaw just about dropped. The man making his way towards us was tall, auburn haired, and hazel eyed. His features were sharp and his eyebrows were as womanly now as they had been more than a hundred years ago.

He was Harada Sanosuke through and through, aside from the khaki shorts and white t-shirt. I thought it might have been the very same until he started talking.

"Good afternoon! Thanks for taking a moment from your busy lives to humor me,"

Ren nodded to him and I absently told the waitress who'd appeared in my state of befuddlement that I'd have a coffee and two sesame seed donuts.

"Not a very lively bunch, Maria-chan?"

She laughed. "They're just a little miffed with me,"

He smirked good naturedly. "Hey, we're miffed too. I don't like being followed. So let's discuss how we might switch rolls with our stalker,"

"I haven't said anything about working with you," I reminded him.

He formally addressed me, holding out his hand. "Tsubaki Takamaru; law student and bicycle courier of goods and gossip. Nice to meet you,"

I grudgingly shook his hand. "Shiranui Kyou."

Satisfied he launched into a detailed report on the times they had been followed, the areas where they had been followed, and pictures of the various people that had been following them. Several faces turned up five or six times.

It was hard to tell if they were humans or demons from pictures alone. It wasn't until the last ten or so when the red haired man showed up that I was convinced.

"Have you seen this one very often?"

He looked surprised at first. "Yeah; damn hard to get a picture of him though,"

"Maria?" Ren asked softly.

"He's easy enough to spot, but only from a distance." She confirmed. "He disappears the moment you look down to pull your phone out though,"

I sighed. "I'll take your offer but don't expect to get paid much, if at all. You'll just be coming along for the ride, got it?"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>If I get through this I will cry many tears of joy X.X I didn't edit this one so point out any mistakes, please :P<strong>

## 19. Magnetic Silver

\*\*Thanks for the review, fallingwisteria! You're so quick :D I had to bring Sano into the mix ;D otherwise Maria would never have a proper guy friend outside of Ren's close family :P\*\*

\*\*wenyigo! I haven't heard from you in ages D: school is such a bum :| I'm glad you're enjoying the story!\*\*

\*\*Hikiri! Thanks for the review! Tsubaki Takamaru is pretty much a reincarnation of Sano, probably because Sano's death in the anime was pointless and my Godly rules dictate he deserves a better life XD Ren is immune to silver because any descendant of the Beni-hime, male or female, is passively immune. \*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review, The Queen of Water :)\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower<p>

Chapter 19: Magnetic Silver

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Something was definitely up. Ren had been acting oddly for the past week or so; insisting that we, or at least me, stay at home whenever possible. I figured he was keeping something from me again.</p>

I trusted him to tell me, eventually, so I tried not to let it bother me. I was going stir crazy being trapped inside though. If the restlessness continued I would probably snap.

The urge to leave \_maybe \_wouldn't be so bad if he wasn't deliberately trying to convince me to stay in the apartment.

Fed up, I slammed my hands on the kitchen table. The bang and clattering dishes startled Ren. He worriedly glanced up from the salad he'd been picking at.

"We're going for a walk after supper."

"What? Why?"

I stiffened my eyebrows. "This isn't a suggestion. Unless you want me to start compulsively cleaning the apartment you'll humor me,"

He had the audacity to smirk at me. "The apartment could do with a good cleaning."

I would have tried to flip the table if he wasn't resting his elbows on it. I wouldn't get very far like that.

"We're going for a walk."

He sighed, stabbing a cherry tomato. "Fine."

Twenty minutes later I had to all but drag him out of the apartment. Suzumu was actually in the lobby when we went down, which almost threw a wrench in my plans. Ren tried to use his presence as an excuse to delay and even cancel our walk.

He was really hell bent on keeping me inside. I could guess why but I thought his concern was way too exaggerated.

"Suzumu," he called. "What are you doing down here?"

It took Suzumu a minute to look up. He was quite preoccupied with his phone. "Just got back from the convenience store,"

He was holding a plastic bag and judging by the condensation dripping off the bag he hadn't just returned. I could bet my next check that he'd gotten an email and hadn't moved from the spot since receiving it.

"Suzumu?" I asked. "Did you by chance buy ice cream?"

He seemed to come out of his stupor and studied his bag, noticing that it was dripping. He slipped his phone into his pocket and waved awkwardly. "Gotta run,"

I slipped my hand into Ren's, pulling him outside, a satisfied smile on my lips.

"So," Ren mused. "Any idea what route we're taking?"

"Not really,"

He was silent for a few minutes, until the apartment was at least out of sight. "You must have had a friend like Suzumu back in London. You practically know him better than he knows himself,"

I snorted. "I went to an all girls' boarding school. Of course there were a few strange ones,"

"So, do you miss any of your friends from London?"

"I was like a rebel princess back in London. I was so angry all the time that I just bitched a lot about my mother and skipped classes. Everyone thought I was just a spoiled rich girl mad with Mommy for shipping me off. I was,"

"It was hard."

I nodded. "Yeah. I was really happy to come to Japan, intent on living on my own." I squeezed his hand lightly. "Meeting you was probably the best thing that ever and will ever happen,"

He tugged me closer, elusively brushing his lips against my temple.

"What about your childhood?"

He laughed shortly. "That was ages ago,"

"Tell me about it," I nagged sweetly.

He ruffled his hair. "I had a temper,"

"Had?" I teased.

He grumbled halfheartedly. "Worse than it is now. Oyaji says the oldest child is always the one to make all the mistakes and do the stupidest stuff. I can't say he's wrong,"

"Well, I'm an only child so I'm obviously spoiled," I stuck my tongue out at him and he tried to nip it between his thumb and index finger.

"I lived in a place called Agano until I was about thirty. It was a mercenary village and I was constantly expected to be the best in my generation since Oka-san was the leader at the time and both of my parents were Oni."

"Ayame-san was the leader of a mercenary village?!" I couldn't imagine the short and sweet tempered woman as a leader of a bunch of mercenaries.

"Yes. She was the last leader of the Agano. They're the people that Shiranui works for,"

"Who's the leader now?" Ren was the oldest so I assumed it hadn't gone into his family's hand a second time.

"My youngest sibling, Shou."

"Oh," he didn't sound bitter so I guess he hadn't wanted the position anyways. "Where did you go after that?"

He squinted, as though the memory was eluding him. "I spent a while with my father's family. Oyaji's oldest brother, Chiaki, had decided to become acting head of the Amagiri family when his young wife's father abruptly passed on. Amagiri-san was traveling abroad at the time," he paused, struggling to word something that put a half smile on his face. "Suzumu's father Chiharu should have become leader but he was suddenly quite interested in touring China."

"So your father was going to become the leader? What about your grandfather? Did he . . . ?"

"Die? Hell no. He's still kicking somewhere down in Okinawa. He just decided he'd had enough. When Oka-san was satisfied that Shou was handling the Agano affairs smoothly she and Oyaji picked up roots and moved to the Kazama household. Until then my grandmother wanted me to be drilled in running a clan and boy was she strict. I could hardly sneeze in that house without getting walloped,"

I giggled, picturing it. The comical image broke apart when I computed what he had just said. "Wait!"

"What?"

"Does that mean you're going to be the next head of your family?"

He rubbed his chin. "Probably. Shou's kids consider themselves Agano and nothing else. I have three sisters; Kaori, Nanami, and Chouko. Kaori lives in Europe; Nanami's children aren't pureblooded and the Oni hierarchy of clans is still too conservative; and Chouko married into the previous Southern Oni clan, the Mizumoto."

He saw that he'd lost me on the last part and he rolled his eyes.

"Your father brought it up once,"

I pursed my lips. "You mean the Cardinal-whatsits?"

He scowled at me. "The four Oni families with the most power. West, Kazama; East, Hijikata; South, Kurosawa; North, Wakehisa. The Mizumoto were overpowered by the Kurosawa several hundred years ago and lost both their status as the Southern Oni and were exiled. East used to be Yukimura but has since become Hijikata. They're considered the weakest politically and physically."

I digested that for a moment and we were quiet. The hair began to rise on the back of my neck as the cheap silence continued. Everything had faded and even the leaves on the trees lining the walk were still.

Ren hauled me against his chest and the muscles there tensed.

The late afternoon sun suddenly seemed a lot weaker, blotted out even. Four people stood maybe three strides away, as though they'd been there the entire time.

"Good afternoon," greeted the only woman in the group. Her Japanese wasn't the best but it was understandable. Her golden brown skin and crow's feet wrinkles gave her a rather approachable air, if not for her cold black raptor eyes.

The man closest to her was of similar appearance and age, though his thin lips remained firmly pressed together. The remaining two were younger; one dark and smiling and the other radiantly olive but frowning.

"\_Is that her?\_" the frowning man asked. "\_She looks rather like her mother,\_"

"Let's all speak the same language," Ren snapped. Only the old man looked uninterested.

"Why don't you speak our language, \_goblin\_?" it sounded like a joke but his honeyed eyes turned hard in his head, contrasting against his almost onyx skin.

The brooding one sized me up, lip still twitching down.

"Are you dissatisfied with your bride, \_Master Basim\_?" the woman queried.

I balked and Ren held me closer still, his chest rumbling with a quiet growl.

"\_She is pale like the moon and terribly easy to look at. Too soft. Even her eyes are bright and no more intimidating than a kitten's.\_"

"Excuse me!" I interrupted. I didn't exactly try to look 'intimidating' but I'd be damned if I let him step all over me. "I don't know who you think you're talking. I don't know what century you just stepped out of but you can't just declare someone to be your wife and expect them to stay quiet."

"\_She's too noisy\_. "

"She's a genuine spitfire!" the golden eyed one laughed. "What did you expect, \_Master Basim\_? Her mother is \_that\_ woman and her honorable grandfather wouldn't roll over for even you,"

"\_A rather uncivilized bunch,\_" he sniffed. He seemed to be refusing to respond in Japanese.

"What's this about?" I demanded, ignoring the pressure of Ren's grip around my shoulders. He was caught between wanting to listen to their craziness and wanting to run. The only thing that had kept him at my side was his weariness. They had appeared so suddenly that even he doubted we could make a clean escape.

The woman's lip turned up in a cat grin. "It's the greatest honor. \_Master Basim\_ is inviting you to join his harem,"

"Like hell he's 'inviting' her!" Ren roared, shoving me behind him.

She ignored Ren's outburst and continued speaking levelly. "You would want for nothing in your long life. Your children would be well provided for and honored by the \_Chamber of Salamanders\_,"

I could practically hear his muscles straining and his thoughts spinning. He was trying to come up with a reliable plan. I could at least buy him some time.

"Why me? I'm just a half-breed,"

The golden eyed one narrowed his eyes at me. "That's exactly why you're valuable. Maybe not for producing a crowned heir but at least for the novelty of a demon that is both flesh and spirit; raw magic and brute strength."

I didn't reply and the woman's eyes opened just a little wider; surprised at my lack of comprehension or stupidity. The '\_Master\_' just rolled his eyes.

"Your mother is the daughter of our esteemed \_Grand Master\_; a mighty fire Jinn, an Ifrit."

I swallowed. "And my grandmother?"

She sung a different tune at that. "A detestable seductress," she spat. "A heartless Succubus,"

I mutely whispered the word on my breath. A Succubus?

The old man lifted a hand (as if in greeting) and Ren jumped back, taking me with him. Hot fire licked at us, appearing inches from the man's hand. Despite the heat my skin felt cold and needles bubbled in my stomach; prickling. Black stars danced in the corner of my eyes.

Ren attempted to flee in one direction but the old man cut him off. The old woman pulled me away from Ren at the same moment and I struggled against her surprisingly lose grip.

I elbowed her in the nose and she shrieked, pulling away. They might have been quick but they didn't seem much stronger than an average person. That relieved me until I looked to Ren and saw that they had at least succeeded in separating us through a blazing white wall of flame.

He was at least avoiding the flames, always trying to stay near enough that they wouldn't be able to force us even further apart.

Our eyes met and I saw that his crimson eyes were beginning to illuminate. I thought at first it was just the light from the fire but even the air was charged with a sort of force that I instinctively knew belonged to Ren.

The grin on the dark one's face had grown at least three sizes and he had joined in creating the strange white flame. The heat grew and I knew it must have been getting hard for Ren to breathe.

The way they tried to circle it around me made me wonder if they were trying to knock me unconscious from a lack of oxygen. They seemed to

direct the flame exactly in front of themselves as well. I assumed they had to breathe.

I didn't know if fire could kill me or how I might regenerate from severe burns but I had to do something before Ren was snuffed out by the fire. He was doing a great job avoiding the flames but he was slowly getting boxed in. He couldn't jump over the pillars either; they were too high.

I stopped breathing all together. I was afraid a breath of the fire would burn up my brain. Suddenly collapsing wouldn't be a good idea. As it was my eyes were irritatingly dry and the figures around me were beginning to lose their form.

Ren seemed to be getting sluggish and I sprinted through the wall of flame. I faintly heard the group of fours' astonished gasps, and turned my nose to them, ignoring the flames that curled around my body.

I broke through the wall and tumbled to the ground, rolling until I felt the flames die. In a matter of seconds they'd eaten their way through the arms of my shirt and knees of my jeans.

I felt Ren's hand on my shoulder and had to blink a few times before my sight returned, if only a little. I really hoped Ren was alright. He was rasping more than breathing.

A shot of flame tried to snake around us and I swatted at it thoughtlessly. There was a feeling of water running down my arm and the flame twisted away.

"Maria?" Ren's voice even sounded dry. "Did you do that?"

"I think," I could have jumped at the sound of my own voice. I had been breathing normally for a while, despite the heat, and realized it had done more damage than I'd thought.

My vision burned white and though I couldn't see anything I could visualize the scene; the swirling fire obeying cold currents that leaked like windblown sand from two of the four. The younger man's current was a lot stronger but unwieldy where as the older one's was more like a perfectly coiled serpent.

I tested my own flow, drawing the cold sand from my chest and emptying it out in front of me and Ren. The air itself felt cold and heavy and Ren breathed a little deeper. I willed it forward until it collided with the hot wall, howling viciously before it ate through and met with the enemy's stream.

It suffocated the fire and a blistering wind blew in all directions.

For a moment the old man was startled and Ren took advantage of the opening to spring forward; fist smashing the man's ribs. Enraged, the woman set a fire of her own. I had anticipated something like that and Ren was already looped with the strange ethereal energy. Her flames bounced off of him harmlessly, spitting sparks.

They wearily backed together, completely disregarding the older gentleman. For the most part he laid still with his knees lifted to

his stomach.

"\_This is ridiculous,\_"

He disappeared, making no sound. I only noticed he was close when Ren pulled me away. I heard the lid pop off a metal canister and was sloshed with a fine grained material. As it hit the ground it made a light clinking like tiny metal beads.

I hadn't even blinked and could feel it in my eyes. There was a faint tingling that quickly became unbearable. It was like an itch that couldn't be scratched, or the skin pinched from a scar.

Sharply I inhaled, gasping from the unreal feeling. Whatever he'd thrown had left a fine dust in the air and I choked. It hurt, I realized. I wasn't even properly aware that I had dropped onto my knee, squeezing my throat.

I gagged, retching until I expelled frothy, bloody foam. More was forming in my chest, like someone had poured baking soda and vinegar straight into my lungs.

Ren picked me up, clutching me to his chest. There was quite an aura rolling off of him.

"Lucky for us your beautiful face will return to normal given a bit of time." If I could have I would have loved to smack the smile off his face.

Everything was like static through the pain. I could feel the heat of the fire but the paths they were creating to control it was fuzzy. Ren dodged about, trying to put distance between us and them without success.

I scattered the stream of sand in all directions, not caring that it was lukewarm. The fires leapt up, a vortex forming and spinning the inferno into a tornado.

They bounded away and Ren saw his chance, a sudden whoosh of power coloring his presence. In just a fraction of a second the caustic air disappeared and a relieving cool breeze caressed my face.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ayame's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Ren barged into the house at about the same time the sun sank beneath the horizon; his Oni horns disappearing, white hair turning gold, golden eyes browning and reddening.<p>

He appeared in the kitchen where Chikage and I were having a drink so suddenly that Chikage spewed the sake through his nose. I would have found it funny if not for the onslaught of blood that assaulted my nose.

"Why the hell do you always come here?!" holding his nose, Chikage's glare softened, if only a little.

He might have tried his damnedest to sound irritated but he was just as concerned over Maria's bloodied face as I was. Ren's intrusions didn't bother him in the least either. He hadn't visited so often in a long while.

It was more urgent for me to worry about Maria.

"Ren, screw off! I'm plucking them, that's that!"

"We're not gambling your sight," he hissed, holding her hands away from her face. "What if they don't grow back?"

"I've already told you!" she yowled, still struggling to rip her own eyeballs out. "I've grown back a finger before; an eye can't be that different."

She was putting up quite a fight, either that or Ren didn't want to risk damaging her even further.

"And I'm telling you we're not gambling your sight!" he growled back. A moment later he got backhanded.

I noticed the gritty metal in her blistered skin. A lot of demons were vulnerable to silver and it struck me that there might be demons even more susceptible to silver than Oni.

The bigger pieces were beginning to push themselves out of her skin and I intervened, shooing Ren and taking Maria to the sink to wash it off.

I turned the faucet a quarter and pulled out the hose, lightly rinsing off her face. Her nose was still bleeding and her back shook from a suppressed cough.

"Did you have any idea that you reacted so severely to silver?"

Maria grit her teeth. "None,"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I only briefly explained to Oka-san that I thought the Ifrits that attacked Maria were connected to the red haired demon. Maria was in the back room resting a bit now that she'd been bandaged up. I was waiting for Oyaji to bring the Toyota back from the apartment. It was probably time for me to try and explain the danger she was in.<p>

By the time we did get home Maria's pain had mostly passed and her face had at least healed. She was incredibly grumpy, which was understandable.

I bit my lip, finding the words. "Maria, you realize that this wasn't a coincidence . . . right?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"The red haired man and the Ifrits earlier; they're both foreign demons after you."

She felt her way to the couch, gently massaging her temples. "Yeah, I don't really care about all that right now."

I sighed and sat on the edge of the sofa next to her, carefully pushing her hair back. Her complexion was once again flawless.

I lightly pressed a kiss to her lips. "Are you gonna be alright?"

"Yeah," she mumbled back, craning her neck and searching blindly for my warmth.

"You should get some rest,"

"In a minute," she murmured. She snuggled up to my chest and I leaned back on the couch. It was kind of amazing that she could act as though nothing was wrong when we'd been attacked by probably the most frightening demons I had faced in a long while.

She snared a kiss, eagerly. It almost felt like I'd licked my lips and touched them to a twelve volt battery. I tapped her shoulder, trying to pull away.

I felt dizzy all of a sudden and slumped against the backrest. A distant buzz filled my ears. I could have been dying for all I knew and I probably wouldn't care.

A pleasantly long minute passed and Maria broke the kiss with a contented huff, resting her head on my shoulder.

"Ren?" she asked, sitting up quickly. I lazily and weakly tugged on her elbow.

"Yeah?"

"Are you alright?"

I nodded. My tongue felt like lead.

"You know, my eyes don't hurt at all anymore."

"That's great . . ."

She laughed and stood up and I had to stop myself from complaining.

"Come on, let's get you to bed."

At that moment I only faintly recognized that her being part Succubus made a lot of sense.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Thank god! Another chapter finished.<strong>

\*\*Please review!\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review, The Queen of Water!\*\*

\*\*I corrected the typo :) thanks for the review and for the help, fallingwisteria. Glad you liked the last chapter!\*\*

\*\*Q.Q Thank you for the review, Hikiri! Thanks for complimenting Ren!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower</p>

Chapter 20: Burnout

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV</strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I should have been happy that I solved the nagging curiosity about my mother without actually having to ask her in person. Well, I was still kind of happy about that but it certainly didn't make up for the answer.</p>

Oni, I could deal with. Hell, being part Oni meant I had a deep and physical connection with Kazama and his family. It made our relationship almost normal.

Being part Ifrit was tolerable but still a pain in the ass. It was irritating that I was somehow related to a group of ancient, sexist, pigs. '\_Join my harem?\_' like hell! Having an affinity with fire was hardly a consolation prize.

\_Succubus\_?! It made a lot of sense in regards to my mother. She practically had a new boyfriend every month. I didn't doubt she cheated on the current one either.

But I wasn't like that. I hadn't had a single boyfriend up until I went to Japan. I wasn't some seductress. I honestly wanted to have a monogamous relationship with Ren. I was perfectly happy with just Ren. More than happy.

Did he feel cheated? Like he'd only been attracted to me because I was part Succubus? I wasn't even sure if I was the only one having thoughts of that nature. He still treated me the same. It was driving me nuts.

His morning alarm for his first class went off and he stirred, grumbling. Ren rolled out of bed, the muscles on his bare back flexing as he stretched.

"Ren?"

He turned to look at me, bangs flattened on one side and sticking up on the other.

"Do you . . . ?" I trailed off, contemplating just dropping the matter.

His quirked an eyebrow. "Do I what?"

I took a deep breath. "Do you . . . Are you bothered by me being a Succubus?"

In his morning stupor his face remained questioning for a moment. I thought I would have to ask again until a small grin began to tug on his lips.

He scoffed, still smiling. "It explains why I always lose . . . but I know your secret now; I won't be taken by surprise anymore."

I blushed. Ren probably thought right from the start that it was unusual that a mere human could make him melt with just a kiss. Either that or he thought he must have been crazy in love.

He went back to getting ready, pulling his art portfolio together.

"Where were you yesterday afternoon?" I quizzed. He would have had his portfolio done if he'd been home.

"I picked up an old heirloom," he pointed to it in the corner, still in long and thin cylinder case. I figured it was a tapestry or something.

\* \* \*

><p>Ren still didn't want me heading outside or anything (outside of college) but when the couriering company I worked for called I didn't refuse.</p>

I did refuse to avoid the problem and left Ren a note. He could track me with his smart phone if it bothered him that much.

We kicked their butts pretty soundly the last time and I doubted they'd be back for round two so soon. I went through the three deliveries they had offered me without issue.

I wasn't surprised that Takamaru wasn't on duty. He hadn't quit but he was off having fun being an incognito spy with Shiranui. He hadn't cared about the money he made as a courier right from the start.

Money reminded me that my mother still hadn't noticed my account's stability and I wondered if she really was checking in on me as often as I thought she would.

Maybe she was happy to be rid of me. I wouldn't have first assumed it by her controlling ways, even while I had been in a dorm. I didn't know if I was relieved or disappointed.

I signed out of the building after locking up my bicycle and changing back into my regular clothing. I had to walk home again and was really starting to miss my motorcycle. Ren had the keys.

The only thing that unnerved me now was the darkness. It just felt

like if anything was going to happen it'd be in some dark corner. There were lots of dark corners on my way home.

I might have jinxed myself. I glanced over my shoulder only once and the moment I looked back I almost walked head long into the smiling Ifrit from before.

Wearing layers of black didn't help and he smiled wider when I jumped back, assuming a shaky defensive stance. His yellow eyes reflected the minimal light.

I swallowed my fear. "The '\_Master\_ ' isn't joining us this evening?" I mocked.

He cruelly simpered, shark teeth showing. "After that tantrum he's become quite convinced that you'd be a hazard to his other wives in the harem."

I almost puked when I realized he had come back for me, probably to take as his gazillionth wife. I anchored my stance. I wasn't fast or strong like most demons but I still had that strange desert fire.

There was no Ren to protect me this time. The beastly man surged forward, invisibly fast. He grabbed my arm, snapping me to his chest.

I didn't let myself become disorientated from the rushing speed and wrenched his arm, flipping him over my small shoulders and hard to the ground.

He was dazed for part of a second before getting up in a blur, squaring off with me more cautiously. I waited for him to make a fire.

I thought I might have been able to make a fire of my own but the feeling of sand flowing softly from my stomach through my veins to the palms of my hands was gone. It was like someone had flipped an hourglass last time. The sand was still there but gravity wasn't steadily pulling it down this time. I needed to somehow flip it.

After a terse glaring contest he laughed derisively. He had come to the conclusion that I couldn't make my own fire. He was back to having the advantage and he knew it.

Before I could have at least counted on the control I could take over his fire.

"You have no spark," he gibed. We both knew he could drag me all the way back to wherever the hell he was from without much trouble.

Time was running out for me and I hoped Ren was starting to wonder where I was. Until then I had to find some kind of weapon. I entertained the thought of somehow nailing him with a metal pipe while he was moving ultra fast. He might cleave himself in half.

I imagined what he might do to me once he got a hold of me and almost visibly gagged. The alarms in my head were sounding so loudly that my thoughts were silenced and that relieved me.

My chest burned uncharacteristically and I instinctively stretched my hand out. The cold feeling of nighttime sand didn't come; if anything it was burned away and an unexpected, brilliant, green flame poured out.

It felt heavy and dropped to the ground, melting the pavement and cracking a layer of gritty stones. Without the cool sand it burned wildly, seemingly with a mind of its own.

The man jumped back, immensely surprised. The look turned to a disgusting sort of desire. He saw me as nothing more than something to be possessed.

"Witch fire," he breathed, entirely awed.

I felt a shiver run down my spine and finally found the sand; curbing the fire's appetite and keeping it close enough to deter the Ifrit but far enough away to avoid burning myself.

Now that I was using fire he saw no reason to hold back his and conjured up a massive amount to counter the strange green flames I had created. They didn't hold up at all and were consumed immediately.

He stubbornly persisted, feeding my fire great pillars of his. I thought he might have been trying to throw off its balance and make it spiral out of control.

He was the sort that literally needed to be burned before giving up and I accepted that.

I didn't want to actually kill him though. It'd probably haunt me for the rest of my life and I didn't doubt that I would get some form of punishment. I just need to closely rein the green fire in and box him in.

As I was setting the plan in motion my chest suddenly made cracking noises and I rigidly collapsed, knees punching the ground hard. I was winded and tucked my chin to study the cause.

My jaw slackened. The flesh had peeled back, charred from my collar bone and down past my shirt. Bones peaked out beneath the skin, blackened and crackling.

"It takes years of practice to sustain a fire for longer than a few minutes," he remarked shakily but somehow haughtily.

He stomped towards me, grabbing my arm. I thought my arm would snap off; even the bones there felt like they'd become brittle from the heat.

I grabbed his forearm with my free hand and gripped, trying to throw him again. Dry scrunching and a sickening pop made me squeeze my eyes shut.

He howled and fell to his knees. It was his arm that broke off like log in a hearth. His eyes widened as his broken limb began to fall apart in chunks, the wind sweeping it away as it deteriorated into ash.

Before I could blink my eyes he was gone, burned away to nothing. I delicately clenched my hands, checking if I was going to fall apart as well. I moved extra slowly and tried not to bend my arms as I got out my phone.

I shook as I punched in Ren's number. God, don't let me turn to dust!

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Shiranui's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Somehow I found the Tsubaki Takamaru fellow acting as my backup. He kept up well enough but the missions still proceeded slower. Not being able to pseudo teleport had that affect.<p>

It was made even more difficult by virtue of the fact that he couldn't know about demons. If he so much as hinted he thought something weird was going on the Agano would descend on him like a piranha. The consequences wouldn't be too grizzly; just his life in servitude to them.

I had my doubts at first but it seemed he really had no intention of asking about anything unnecessary. I thought he might have had a clue on his own but he made no indication that he wanted to know more.

The balance was delicate. I could complain all I wanted and tell him not to come to 'work' but he was as bullheaded as Harada Sanosuke had been. Never mind that he was actually pretty good at surveillance.

I generally tried to keep him out of the loop though, which was exceptionally difficult when I needed two sets of eyes.

The current 'mission' had us both chasing down some young tanuki bastard who had been spotted none-too discreetly trading documents with the red haired demon. The latter was too difficult to pin down alone so we hoped locating the tanuki and beating information out of him would help.

At the moment Tsubaki was chatting away to himself. If he'd actually been Harada I probably would have responded and we never would have gotten a lick of work done. But he wasn't and I found it annoying that he acted so chummy anyways.

If I thought about it, Harada and I hadn't even been friends either. He was the only one who acted so damn friendly.

". . . Were you listening, Shiranui-san?"

"No."

He raised a thin eyebrow and shrugged, going back to silently fiddling with his phone. I finished my coffee and scanned the crowd.

He didn't stay quiet for long.

"You have a stick up your ass, don't you?"

I almost gaped at him. "'The hell are you talking about?'"

His lip twitched almost triumphantly, as if a rise from me was all he was looking for.

"You've had me decided right from the start and it pisses me off. Do you have something against me, Ponytail?"

I snorted. "One nagging partner is enough for me,"

He was about to flip me off but something caught his eye and he instead gestured for me to get up and follow him. Expertly, he navigated through the crowded outdoor cafÃ© and I was impressed he'd had the foresight to pay for our bill in advance.

Tsubaki darted down an alleyway, ducking behind a garbage can. I dived next to him as I spotted who we were following.

"You're mad!" I whispered. At the other end of the alley was the red haired man, walking deliberately slow as he approached another unknown demon.

"We're not going to make any progress if we just dodge about," he chided. He had a smirk on his face as he got a noise amplifying device with earbuds. He passed it to me, another subtle sign that he had more than just a clue as to what was going on.

I slipped them in and quickly adjusted the volume.

"\_You have all of the documents now?\_"

"\_And the forgery is impeccable\_?" His voice was chilling, even over the static.

"\_You'll be able to get through any airport and into any country with them. I guarantee it,\_"

"\_I see\_."

"\_Might I ask; when do you plan on leaving? We're very grateful to you for financing us these last few months . . . if we could properly show our appreciation we would\_."

"\_Just the thought is adequate. If I wait any longer it will be difficult to get the girl out of the country. Her mother has been very persistent as of late.\_"

"\_The mother? Victoria Miller\_"

"\_Shh. We have a rat,\_"

I stiffened and signaled for Tsubaki to slowly back into the nearest doorway. He turned and walked straight into the red haired man, who'd appeared without making a sound.

Like a viper he pulled a stun gun no bigger than a fat wallet from his back pocket, biting the demon with the electrical fangs. I was

impressed, even if it didn't do anything.

The red haired demon didn't even flinch; just swiped his hand over them, wiping them off like dust. Tsubaki had frozen and the man reached forward, unhurriedly as he closed his fingers around Tsubaki's throat.

I couldn't lift a hand or a leg as I was forced to listen to his neck pop, one bone at a time. He deliberately wasn't killing him until he snapped every last bone he could. Sirens wailed some distance away and I abruptly broke away from the trance.

I shot him four times before he let go of the fragile human and then caught said human while shooting the rest of my rounds at the malevolent demon. In the next sixty frames I was a good distance away, wondering if there was even a point in taking him to a hospital.

He had stopped breathing, wasn't moving at all, circulation was slowing and he would spend his last thoughts in agony.

This new Harada Sanosuke was going to die for naught if I didn't do something fast.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Two chapter x.x gotta get them done! Very lose editing. I'll thank you kindly for pointing out any mistakes :)<strong>

21. Black Blood

\*\*Yeah. Crunch time X.X\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review, The Queen of Water! You're always so quick : )\*\*

\*\*Yeah, Sano doesn't seem to have a whole lot in the luck department XD Thanks for the review, fallingwisteria!~\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review, Hikiri! I feel bad about abusing Sano's reincarnation too XD\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower<p>

Chapter 21: Black Blood

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>It seemed like normal was the last thing we could hope for. Only a few days had passed since the incident with the Ifrits and the silver powder. Maria hadn't been properly recovered from that when she foolishly went out and scraped with another Ifrit, on her own.<p>

She definitely wasn't recovered from that. She barely wanted to move from the bedroom to the kitchen, terrified she was going to crack apart and turn to dust. But she was beginning to sound more whiny than actually afraid. I still had to reassure her constantly that she wasn't brittle, anymore, though.

I didn't deny that she'd been in a state when I located her. Her skin had been peeling away from charred bones, particularly those in her chest. The same had been happening to her hands and feet; anywhere that the skin was thin with bones near the surface.

There'd been no trace of the Ifrit who attacked her and it'd taken her a while to get the story out. I could understand that she was traumatized from watching a demon, not unlike herself, turn to ash and blow away in the gentle breeze.

I sat on the couch next to her feet, massaging them gently.

"You'll get kicked out of art school if you keep skipping,"

"I know," she grumbled, voice muffled by the pillow she had pressed her face into. "Butâ€"

"You're not going to turn to dust," I intercepted. "You're all healed now,"

Maria gingerly sat up, jutting her lip at me. "Are you sure?"

I took her hand and lightly raked my fingertips over her knuckles, smiling lightly. They were as soft as ever. "I'm sure."

Satisfied, for the time, she leaned closer and pecked the corner of my lips. "What's for supper?"

The time to contemplate that wasn't granted as a great clattering from outside on the balcony broke the thought. I was pretty sure something had knocked over Maria's collection of perennial bearing, handcrafted, flower pots.

The source, Shiranui, stormed into the apartment. He actually came through the open balcony sliding door, bursting the mesh screen out in the process. I was about to start demanding an explanation for his destructive behavior when I noticed the lump slung over his shoulder.

Tsubaki Takamaru was still, neck bruised and misshapen. His lips were somewhere between blue and purple and though he clearly wasn't breathing the sense of a living person still permeated his presence.

Shiranui had arrived white haired and horned, yellow eyes feverish. He let it fade away and Maria finally seemed to noticed Takamaru, gaping. Tears were budding in her eyes and she stood, trying to set a course of action.

"What happened?" I coolly questioned.

"No time to explain." Shiranui replied curtly. "I didn't bring him to the hospital for a reason,"

I knew immediately what he was alluding to. "Blood sharing is taboo," I reminded him. "Even then I doubt it would save him,"

"Taboo for Oni," he retorted.

I peeked sidelong at Maria, who still seemed frozen with shock. "There's no guarantee it'll work,"

"Either way, he's dying right now."

I'd thought Shiranui didn't give a damn for the human. He even seemed at first to detest him. It'd always been hard to follow Shiranui's nuances in mood though. He was either utterly simple or a complete enigma.

"Maria?"

Her head snapped up. "Is there something I can do?"

Shiranui slipped a small knife from his belt and tossed it to her underhand. Numbly, she caught it and came forward.

"Demon blood is like an elixir," Shiranui described. "It can be a poison to humans and drive them mad; curse or bestow them with godly powers; even heal a fatal wound."

She bit her lip, complying with his thought. She cut her wrist deeply, willing the wound to remain unhealed, however uncertainly. Maria's blood bled the usual red for the first few drops, quickly becoming a dark, sweet smelling syrup.

Tsubaki's eyes flew open the moment her blood touched his tongue, shortly rolling back in his head. His neck began visibly straightening out, bruising rapidly aging. Blood vessels in the white of his eyes broke one after another.

Maria tried to shy away, seeing that he was clearly in pain but Shiranui grabbed her forearm and kept her there. I growled lowly.

He began thrashing as soon as he was healed enough, finding his voice thereafter. Shiranui finally let go of Maria and she almost fell over, covering her ears as she backed away.

Trembling, she shut her eyes and crouched in the corner of the living room.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Shiranui's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>I went to check on Tsubaki Takamaru before leaving. Ren had situated him on his and Maria's living room couch.<p>

It'd taken him a good hour to settle down and even now he twitched and moaned in his state of hyper-regeneration.

Ren leaned against the wall, looking towards the bedroom where Maria

was recovering from her shock. The poor thing probably felt she was to blame. No one had known her blood would throw him into some sort of transformation.

"He's still human, right?" I asked, thinking back to the Rasetsu of Koudou's time.

"I know very little about Maria and the properties of her blood that aren't Oni; your guess is as good as mine." The thought of Rasetsu probably didn't cross Ren's mind. He might have known a little about them but I doubted he had any firsthand knowledge.

"How is the little she-demon? Still rattled?" he knew that better than I did.

"She doesn't like to hurt anybody,"

"She saved him,"

"But still hurt him."

I nodded. I was the one at fault here. I should never have agreed to let a human help out on such a dangerous mission. I had wanted to prove desperately to myself that he was of no connection to Harada Sanosuke.

All I had succeeded in proving was that after a century and a half I was still a conceited ass. I couldn't even doubt the reality of reincarnation.

I jumped from my reflection at the sound of a shrill scream. Ren was dashing to the bedroom almost before I could even lift my chin.

We were in time to throw the door open (probably breaking the hinges) and witness the red haired demon holding onto the window frame. Maria was tucked under one arm, no more importantly than a sack of potatoes.

He disappeared without a backwards glance and we scrambled after him. We spun in a circle, finding no trace of the red haired demon and Maria.

I found it insulting that the man could move faster than we could, easily, and had let us think otherwise for so long. I thought I would have rather have faced off and died ages ago than be teased and toyed with for so long.

Ren made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat, assuming his true form.

He was the truest Oni I had ever known. His temper was legendary and when he was ticked off like this he would, without a doubt, seek out and find his target. He pushed off, barely even a streak of white.

I hardly noticed the cylindrical container he'd strung over his shoulder.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>Just a minute ago I'd been at home, trying to sleep off my guilt. The red haired man had grabbed me and almost whisked me away before I could even scream.</p>

Now I found myself at the airport in an inconspicuous corner. Nobody even looked over as I flailed my arms and pounded whatever I could reach.

He set me down with just a hint of annoyance in his eyes as he shook me firmly by the shoulders. "Abandon your struggles,"

I turned to headbutt him but recoiled from the sight of his strange eyes; inverted sclera and tarnished gold irises. I struggled harder to back away from him.

"Who the hell are you?!"

"Reginald Fairbairn, an old friend of your mother."

I panicked. I had been anticipating something to this effect (without all the demons, of course) since I first arrived in Japan. "Did my mother ask you to come here?!"

"Hush child; I am here on no account of that woman."

I thrashed against his arms but his hold was like stone. "Help! Someone, help me!" I shouted, chorused, all but sang.

No one shot a questioning look our way or so much as acknowledged the scene. I felt my stomach sinking and the hair rising across my arms.

I closed my eyes, picturing as I had before an invisible force. The Ifrits had used a sort of flowing crystalline sand to guide their fire.

After concentrating I perceived a sort of barrier. It wasn't sandy like before, more a fine mist; delicate but constant. It surrounded us and I assumed it negated our presence just as natural fog blurred sight and sound.

The man, Reginald Fairbairn, was somehow acutely aware of my efforts. "Ah, I see you have a talent for magic. It would explain your uneven dispersal of physical attributes."

I tried to break away again and contemplated using my fire. It'd be a last ditch effort but I didn't care. His entire being was repulsing.

He twisted me closer and taped his fingers over my heart. "I wouldn't put strain on your delicate heart so soon after almost turning it to charcoal."

"What are you, you sick bastard?!" it was like he was either guessing all that I could try to do or actually reading my mind.

"Just a simple Incubus."

"Like hell!"

It pleased me to discover I wasn't the only one who looked up, startled. Ren had found us, despite being disadvantaged to the strange barrier.

Ren's appearance was, at first, strange. His flaxen hair had faded to a pristine white, messy bangs doing nothing to hide four horns. The smaller inner horns were basically the same as Shiranui's while the outer ones were larger with red rings around the base. The exotic beauty drew me in.

His golden eyes burned as he uncapped the long container, pulling out a much faded red sheathed sword.

"I hoped you would have stayed away," Fairbairn dryly remarked.

"Too bad," Ren seethed, flicking the scabbard away.

Fairbairn forcefully shoved me aside, sending me sliding on the airport tiled floor. Without improvising his barrier he met Ren's first slash with the impromptu materialization of an ornate, wiry, rapier.

Ren easily pushed him back but the Incubus managed to stay within the range of his barrier. I thought it was ridiculous that a fight on a whole different scale, fought between two powerful demons, could take place in an airport.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Please review! Short chapter, I know X.X<strong>

## 22. The Relationship Between Now and Forever

\*\*Thanks for the review, The Queen of Water! You were really on the ball to review so quickly :)\*\*

\*\*Thank you for the review, falingwisteria! I knew right from the start that I was going to use a reincarnation type character for one of the Shinsengumi. It was about a month after I started that I decided for sure that it was going to be Sano. Now I kind of wish I had put someone else through it :'(\*\*

\*\*Hikiri! Thanks for the review! I can't believe this is the last chapter x.x so many things to answer!\*\*

\*\*And a big thanks to everyone for staying with me until now! I don't know all your names but the support I gained through the view statistics is appreciated! I love you all :'D\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Exotic Flower<p>

Chapter 22: The Relationship Between Now and Forever

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Ren's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>The blade was for general purposes, normal.<p>

The 'Douji-giri Yasutsuna' had rested in a museum of national treasures for some time, a fake unbeknownst to most. That Douji-giri was nothing more than a high quality carbon steel katana, stunning in its own right.

The Douji-giri in my hands had quite a different history.

From my grandfather and his forefathers to my uncle Chiaki to my own father, then denounced by myself and held by my mother; keeper of the secret of demon swords.

Its sole purpose for being with me now was that it was a demon slaying blade imbued with silver. Ifrits at least would be no match for it. I hoped the same could be said for Maria's other heritage; Succubi, or Incubi.

Striking him would take a lot more than just swinging at him though. He was fast, probably faster than Oyaji and I could only barely push myself to outperform him. Even Oka-san as the Beni-hime would find it challenging.

From the few times our blades had already met I could glean that my best bet was being able to strike him even once. He was physically stronger than a human and most demons but still no match for the raw power of an Oni.

Being able to outlast him was an impossibility; he probably didn't breathe or feel physical exhaustion, just as Maria didn't.

I had to be constantly alert as well. I hadn't looked at his eyes even once, which was extremely hard. He couldn't petrify or stun me if I didn't look and that was the only thing that really allowed me any chance of winning.

If he had anything else up his sleeves I would be in trouble. It was hard to tell if he was even being serious as he constantly missed by mere millimetres and when he did land slashes they were shallow and barely more than scratches.

He did seem mildly surprised that I healed so quickly from the light wounds inflicted by his silver rapier.

Unexpectedly he delved in closer, eyes appearing right in front of me. He leisurely took his time as I froze, pushing the tip through my lower stomach. The pain jarred me from the hypnosis and I pulled myself away, leaping almost through the strange perimeter of non-existing.

I held one hand over the wound and the other up to Maria. She stopped, tears streaming down her face. The puncture in my gut healed quickly enough and I felt the demon's eyes on me.

"I assume self-perseverance is a strong instinct amongst your

kind."

For an instant he appeared open and I charged forward, sweeping wide. I was short of cleaving him in half but the spray of dark blood was still fatal enough.

"Ren!" Maria cried but I didn't have the lenience to turn an eye her way.

His right hand had only twitched and I found myself coughing up blood. He reached to grab the hilt of his sword and twisted the blade from my chest. I stumbled back, eyes narrowed at the flow of blood I had created. It seemed to evaporate away, revealing his abdomen, perfectly fine.

"My eyes aren't what they used to be," he admitted, flicking blood off his sword with a snap of his wrist. "I meant to end it just now,"

"Yeah, right!" I gasped. My true form held and the small hole began healing.

"Our flight is leaving soon," he commented. "You should just go home; leave with your life."

I growled. "Maria isn't going anywhere with you, Creep!"

He inclined his chin. "You misunderstand; this really is in her best interests, and yours too."

"Any other day I'd like to say I would listen wholeheartedly," I jeered.

He blew a deep breath out and lurched at me, sword arm outstretched. I knocked it away with the wider and firmer blade of the Douji-giri.

"I will speak," he asserted, "and you will listen."

His attack didn't relent and I kept parrying as best as I could. When he did speak, it was as though he wasn't exerting himself at all, which was technically true.

"Where is the pride in your blood? Can you really afford to take a mate of mixed blood when your race is still on the verge of extinction?"

"And I suppose you're so bad off that you have to steal other demon's mates?" I quipped. His sword bit into my neck and I jerked away, glad his vision really seemed to be terrible.

"She has been promised to me for longer than a century,"

And that made everything okay? I grunted, unable to form a witticism aloud. He tried to push me outside of the barrier but I remained firmly rooted. I allowed a breath to be taken and cast my eyes sidelong, examining the expression on Maria's face. The crease between her fair brows showed that the gears were whirring in her head.

She better not have been thinking about throwing herself into the fray.

"You are unworthy of such a rare and noble bloodline!" he declared, his temper flaring up. He threw himself at me, aware that even if I did strike him it would be very unlikely to cause serious damage.

"His heart! Don't aim for anything else!"

Her shout filled me head and chilled my rising temperature from the prolonged transformation.

In a blur of motions I remained locked against the red haired Incubus, silver swords clanging back and forth. The flexible whip-like rapier snapped at my arms and legs while the Douji-giri ripped his chest open thrice in the blink of an eye. He niftily avoided being struck close his heart and I struggled harder to deliver the mortal wound.

Maria must have opened her mouth to give me further instruction. He turned towards her, scowling as he sliced his hand through the air. I allowed myself to be distracted and boiled as she flopped on her stomach, wriggling and holding her neck as a glowing black pattern bleed through her skin.

"Something of mine must never belong to the likes of you!"

I roared, Douji-giri responding with a flush of purple spreading across the blade from hilt to tip. I had no intention of letting him take Maria away from me; especially not in death.

He flung me back with the wave of one hand, focusing on Maria again. I somehow doubted I could get close to him and stood up straight, transferring the sword to one hand.

I aimed the sword as best I could and winded my arm once, releasing it. The fraction of time it took to pierce its target could have been unbearable.

When it finally dug through his chest, flesh, and heart Maria ceased wriggling and rolled onto her hands and knees. One hand felt her neck as the Incubus, Reginald Fairbairn, faltered.

Abruptly a black flame burst from his chest, eating its way through the flesh between his ribs, grinding the bones to dust. The Douji-giri fell from his rapidly shrinking husk. I left it and knelt in front of Maria, pulling her head to my chest.

"You're not going anywhere today," I comforted with a whisper, "you're staying with me."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Maria's POV<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>We somehow slipped away from the airport and no one was any the wiser. We walked away from people to hide the state of Ren's tattered

clothes and the sword he called the Douji-giri.<p>

"Doesn't it ever frighten you that you're part of a world where your kind can die at any moment, unnoticed?"

I looked up at him and squeezed his hand hard. "Does it frighten you?"

"Sometimes,"

"Yet you're prepared to fight, whenever?" I asked.

"Depends on what's on the line," and he smiled; a real Ren-like smile. The kind of smile that made me feel more than just appreciated. I felt like Ren needed me, needed me more than anyone had ever needed me; needed me more than he had ever needed anyone.

"How's Takamaru?" an eternity had passed in my mind. I quickly realized I would find out just how he was when we got home.

"He was doing fine before now. Feverish but good,"

"I did that?" my blood did that. A poison to humans?

"You saved his life."

I gazed up at Ren walking next to me and nibbled my lip. His appearance was back to normal now; flaxen hair and red eyes, no horns. He looked completely human. Tsubaki did too but I wondered if he still was.

"At what price?"

He lightly bumped me with his hip. "At no price. He'll go on with his normal life or pursue a career with the Agano."

"I'm always getting the feeling that no one willingly works for the Agano," I replied, voicing my doubts. I really didn't want to condemn Takamaru to a life like that.

"There are people who willing work for them, and those that work with them. I'll convince Shou to be lenient if he 'recruits' him,"

"Promise?" I didn't know just how much influence he had over his not so little brother. They were both so old; I couldn't imagine either of them actually calling favors.

"I do."

A silence unfolded, interrupted only by our muffled footsteps.

"So what now? After all of this we just go back to art school? No award for surviving consecutive attacks and ousting the foreign invaders?"

"Pretty much."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>December 14<strong>\*\*th\*\*\*\*, 2012. Hokkaido; Maria's Chalet\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Christmas came like always.<p>

Art school let out early thanks to the cooking club's kitchen explosion incident and we left early for our vacation in Hokkaido. Dad's resort had a sale and when Ren made fun of the logo he threatened to make him pay full price, even if he was staying with me.

The skiing season was just beginning and I pictured myself going skiing with Ren. He confessed he'd never been skiing before and I was hoping I could embarrass him.

The tree had gone up the moment we arrived, despite Ren's protest. He wasn't a Christmas kind of person, apparently. He figured the tree could stay in its box until the last minute. I didn't bother telling him we were going hunting for a real tree too, soon.

He wouldn't even help me decorate it, though I suspected that had something to do with the pencil skirt I was wearing. He snorted occasionally, probably to camouflage the ogling.

"Have you decided what you're wearing to the Christmas dinner next week?"

"The dinner party or the one with your father?"

I grit my teeth. "Both,"

"Dress pants and dress shirt with a tie?"

I nodded. "You can wear the Christmas tie to the party," I encouraged.

He scoffed. "Like hell I am."

I turned, lips pursed. He looked away and I returned to decorating. "I brought your suit. You should wear it to the dinner with Dad,"

He huffed quietly. "Do I have to go?"

"Don't be so childish, Ren." I tried to sound severe but I was grinning. "And remember to behave,"

"I will if he does."

I deserted the tree and skipped over to the couch where he sat, noting that his eyes followed me to the T. I sank into the spot next to him and pulled my knees up. He suddenly broke eye contact and touched his pocket, something he had already done a few times in the last hour.

"What's that?" I sweetly intrigued.

"Nothing," he answered quickly, glaring at the tree to avoid dropping

his eyes to mine.

"A Christmas gift?" I doubted it since Ren hadn't been showing much interest in Christmas. He knew if he didn't get me something I'd be mad but I could bet my left toe he wouldn't have it picked up until the day before.

He cleared his throat. "It isn't wrapped."

My jaw actually dropped and I slapped his knee playfully.

"Show it to me!"

"I thought Christmas gifts weren't supposed to be received until Christmas?" he all but mumbled.

"Just show me!" I whined. "I can't wait that long, especially knowing it's in your pocket right now!"

He raised an eyebrow and shrugged, squaring his shoulders. He took it from his pocket, hiding it in his fist. He hesitantly uncurled his fingers, revealing a ring and just a ring, sitting in the palm of his hand. A quarter of the white gold band was decorated with tiny diamonds.

"Ren, this is . . ."

"Too soon," he guessed, shifting to hide a grimacing blush and subtly hurt eyes.

"No!" I intercepted. "I'm just surprised!" I was either about to cry or start jumping around.

"You don't have to accept it right now," he began again, thinking I was just trying to save his feelings. "Butâ€"

I thrust my left hand in front of his face, wiggling my fingers eagerly.

His lips twitched somewhere between a delighted grin and awkward smile. He kissed my knuckles before sliding the ring on. It really explained why Ayame had made me try on her rings a while ago.

I marvelled at it, suppressing a squeal. It was very sophisticated and not entirely over done.

He sighed, contented now that an obvious weight was off his chest. "I won't have to nettle your father, verbally."

I laughed and hugged him tight. "You both live so long; you're going to have to learn to get along."

He rumbled at that. "Oni have even longer memories." I was about to pinch him when he started again. "Being with your will make up for it,"

I melted when I looked into his eyes, so trusting and caring; eyes that could be so deeply concerned for me. Leaning forwards, I kissed him. Softly but deeply, calmly passionate; I didn't want to cheapen the moment.

The wording was eluding me and I left my gratitude unsaid for the time. My love was so overwhelming and for once I was pleased with my rare relationship with eternity.

End  
file.